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## South Asian women and the construction of political identity

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Version: Version of Record

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<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.0000e888>

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**SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
POLITICAL IDENTITY**

**THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE  
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**GEOGRAPHY DISCIPLINE  
THE OPEN UNIVERSITY  
SEPTEMBER 2003**

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Submission date: 19 September 2003  
Award date: 14 September 2004

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I thank Gail Lewis and Steve Pile for their supervision, for giving me full academic support, encouragement and meticulous feedback to complete this thesis. I am grateful to the Social Sciences Faculty at the Open University for initially funding the research.

I am indebted to Marisa Silvestri and Constantinos Phellas who have been very special colleagues at London South Bank University. I would like to express my thanks and appreciation to Marisa Silvestri for being encouraging and resourceful in her reading of this thesis. I thank Professor Heidi Safia Mirza for her introduction to an Asian Women's Project and for initial discussions on the research.

Special thanks to Adrian Budd, and to Lucia Bogado for her care and consideration. In addition I am grateful to my family in particular my mother, father and sister Tina Matoo for their continuing support and love.

Finally I would like to thank all the women interviewees without whom this study would not have been possible.

## **Abstract**

The thesis examines the complex characteristics of agency and identity construction, focusing on South Asian women. Firstly, it attempts to demonstrate the centrality of networks of history and discourses in the construction of the female postcolonial subject. Secondly, it uses qualitative research to challenge the assumed low levels of organization amongst South Asian women, demonstrating that forms of political agency exist.

Historical contextualization of South Asian women's experiences enables us to understand their position, with all the complexities involved, along the axes of caste, class and religion, in contemporary society. It is particularly significant with reference to race, culture and multicultural understandings, facilitating a departure from a stereotypical understanding of passivity and complacency.

The research is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews carried out with South Asian women within the Greater London area. Understanding South Asian women's experiences and the interpretations of 'belonging' goes some way toward unravelling the complexities of subjectivity and identity. Ideas around race and gender and the ability to act individually and collectively are analyzed in the women's narratives, allowing exploration of social positioning and agency. The interviews investigate the processes of negotiation that take place in the construction of identities and new subjectivities; how experience can influence a woman's consciousness of her position in the world. In fact a number of contradictory positions may be taken up as well as adopting a unified identity, for example along the lines of culture or religion.



This research shows how South Asian women understand themselves and examines identity construction, and it is precisely the fluidity of it which is complex, it goes beyond the idea of fixed and essential political identities. Evident are the ways in which women draw on history, and the constant negotiating between essentialized and collective identities, and subjective experiences as post-colonial subjects.

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## Chapter 1

### **'Rocking the Stereotype' and Redefining the Parameters of Political Activism**

#### **Introduction**

I interviewed Zora, a young South Asian woman born and brought up in London, and her statement below captured the essence of this research, to highlight and challenge the often invisible role played by South Asian women in local level political processes.

*'The usefulness of this research is that it shatters stereotypes about women and Asian women in particular. Secondly it makes women like myself realize that our backgrounds and cultures haven't hindered us necessarily at all. In our own way we've been as radical or as revolutionary or as strong as our white counterparts.'*

(Zora, Antiracism Organization<sup>1</sup>)

Zora has recognized the ways in which South Asian women are stereotypically presented. However, despite this common perception of being trapped in a perpetual cycle of complacent passivity and victimhood that denies them political agency, Zora has also acknowledged that South Asian women have been, and continue to be, politically active. Important questions emerge from Zora's double recognition. Firstly, what convergence of factors lead to this doubleness of perception of South Asian women where they are deemed both passive and yet active at the level of local politics? Secondly, to what extent can the historicization of South Asian women contribute to a contextualized understanding of their political agency? Thirdly, how have South Asian women responded to sexist and racist discourses? These questions stand at the heart of this work. In this study, therefore, I examine South Asian women's political agency, making visible the contributions of women to social change with



reference to issues such as education, marriage and sexuality. In particular, I explore South Asian women's roles and involvement in a broad range of local organizations. Chapter One begins by examining South Asian women's political agency and the relevance of feminism as an analytical tool for this study. The chapter then introduces the conceptual terrain and the intellectual context of the thesis. This is developed further in Chapter Two and then deployed in subsequent chapters where I present and analyze my own data and engage with the intellectual antecedents and arguments previously outlined. The last two sections of Chapter One are devoted to the research process and an outline of the thesis.

### **South Asian Women and Political Agency**

The aim of the research is to move away from the myth of passivity to counteract the objectification of South Asian women. With this in mind, the different experiences of Asian women will be discussed, with a focus on the role of discourses, in particular those concerning femininity and masculinity that construct women as dependants, and thus deny them agency. It will demonstrate that despite being constructed as subjects without agency South Asian women have been politically active, even under the most oppressive circumstances. As bell hooks comments:

Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination, that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency [...] Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see.

(hooks, 1992:116)

The 'spaces of agency' and looking 'at one another' for South Asian women have been constructed through the existence of women's organizations and women's specific roles in different types of organizations. My own awareness of South Asian women organizing politically was based on knowledge related to the existence of high profile secular organizations such as Southall Black Sisters. Recent media coverage of forced marriage and honour killings has heightened the profile of Southall Black Sisters further (*The Guardian*, 2003; 2004).

In this study it is through the narratives of women active in Asian women's organizations that a broader version of the political will be brought into play. Although the conceptualization of agency remains a hotly debated issue in social theory (McNay, 2000; Giddens, 1984), the research will show South Asian women as active agents. Political agency has been described as being 'created through situations and statuses conferred on them [subjects]' (J.W.Scott, 1992:34). However, political agency also involves the capacity to make social change, to resist structural constraints, and to challenge racist and sexist discourses. Therefore, in this study political agency will be shown to have many sites such as 'race', gender and religion, working in and against the stereotypes. The different chapters will explore how agency is played out, how it is expressed in a variety of antagonisms. Taken as a whole, therefore, the thesis will show how agency unfolds as multi-layered *and* as infused with contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences. Throughout the thesis, the practices and experiences of political agency will be shown to develop through the micro politics of living a life. Thus, through the women's narratives and their

constructions of identity and subjectivity, it will also demonstrate how women are able to 'rock the stereotype'.

### **Feminism as an Analytical Tool**

Interviewing South Asian women and describing their experiences forms part of a feminist understanding which includes non-traditional forms of political activity. A feminist understanding also allows a move away from a masculinist understanding of political agency (Sudbury, 1998). Therefore, feminism as an analytical tool is central to this thesis for two reasons. Firstly, it draws on the challenges posed to mainstream feminism by black feminists, specifically their criticism of the construction of the universal woman and a particular notion of experience. Secondly, it allows for a more informed understanding of the political activism of South Asian women in British society by drawing on the work of third world feminists. The importance of the link to third world feminism is highlighted in Chapter Three where I employ feminism to understand responses to historical and contemporary issues in India such as *sati* (widow immolation) and the role of women in the Hindutva movement. It is this understanding that the past and the present meet that forms the basis for this thesis of political activism in Chapters One and Two.

Importantly, utilizing the work of black feminists and third world feminists allowed me to engage with the concepts of 'essentialism', the 'Other', and the objectification and perceived homogeneity of third world women (Brah, 1996; Mohanty, 1992). This had two important implications for my concerns. Firstly, it opened up the concepts of 'experience' and 'difference'. Secondly, it allowed



the examination of the intellectual context of contemporary feminist theory through a historical lens. The conceptual link between the past and the present, the west and the east, is made by using black feminist work such as Avtar Brah's notion of the 'inferiorised Other' and third world feminist work such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty's notion of a politics that is not bounded by geography and time (Brah, 1996; Mohanty, 1992). From this, I develop the idea that agency can be considered to be a dynamic space of manoeuvre within and between discourses, places and spaces. I also draw on the idea of collective identities and developments in feminist theory which use the idea of multiple identities to explain political mobilization, and the link between agency, identity and subjectivity (Mama, 1995). My intention is to problematize the notion of a 'comforting story or narrative of the self' (Hall, 1992a:277), i.e. to highlight the contradictions in constructing a political identity.

Subsequent analytical chapters show how feminist theory with its language of rights and equality can be deployed to explain moments in history when South Asian women have been mobilized *and* how racism, sexism and religion impact on their political activity. The predominant themes that emerge from the data are racism, sexism and religion, and in the analytical chapters I have focused on how they inter-relate with feminist understandings and my conception of political agency. The data derived from the interviews drives the thesis, especially in terms of 'speaking' to the theories, with the thematic analysis of the data functioning to integrate the thesis. Considered individually, racism as a theme allows for a more outward analysis of political agency pointing to the structural positioning of some South Asian women within British society. The sexism theme is more of an inward analysis with a focus on how sexism within

their respective 'communities' operates to create oppressive conditions for South Asian women. Religion is in a unique position because it speaks as both an outward and an inward analysis. The role of religion moves between discourses operating in British society and in countries such as Iran that serves to highlight its contradictory nature as a political and personal identity.

The following section provides a starting point for the thesis by locating it within a particular set of discussions about political activism in recent feminist theory. It examines how the parameters of political activism relating to South Asian women can be redefined with an emphasis on multiple sites of political activism (Sudbury, 1998). This will be followed by a section that will interrogate concepts associated with feminism to highlight the debate between western feminists and black feminists. In particular the concepts 'empowerment' and 'resistance' will be examined to show how black feminists responded to oppressive mechanisms. What emerges is the proactive force of political agency at grass roots level which is evident in the narratives of the women I interviewed.

### **Feminism and Political Activism**

This section deals with the changing feminist understandings of what constitutes 'the political', with particular reference to organizational forms of women's political activities. I will suggest that the parameters of political activism need to be broadened to incorporate forms of political activity which are not normally associated with visible electoral politics. The process of extending the parameters of what constitutes political activity is an important step towards the inclusion of black women's claim to political agency through their activism (Sudbury, 1997). I will argue that although the process whereby

black<sup>2</sup> women have reclaimed ethnic identities in their pursuit of equality is complex, it does not necessarily have to be viewed negatively.

The public sphere has conventionally been thought of as the location of politics, whether it is through participation in political parties, trade unions or other forms of civic activities (Elshtain, 1992; Okin, 1978). However, in relation to the first two categories, women are excluded to a greater extent from these activities than men. One example of this is the lesser representation of women in Parliament in liberal democratic societies, such as Britain (Sudbury, 1998). Exclusion from the male dominated public political sphere is recognized in the following statement:

Women are the world's largest excluded group. Even though they make up half the adult population, and often contribute more than their share to society, inside and outside the home, they are frequently excluded from positions of power.

(Human Development Report, UNDP, 1993:25)

If participation in formal structures is limited because of the dynamics of gender, not only is a broader understanding of political activity required but we also need to ask whether South Asian women face major obstacles to political activism because of the intersection of gender, racism and culture. The impact of this trajectory referred to as 'triple oppression' has been highlighted by black feminists' response to western feminism (1982; Mirza, 1986; Amos and Parmar, 1984; Carby). Although black feminist thinking has developed in different directions over the last thirty years and 'black' as an identity is open to interpretation, it is important to retain the relevance of 'black feminism'. This is expressed by Heidi Mirza in *Black British Feminism*:

[...] the political project [black feminism] has a single purpose: to excavate the silences and pathological appearances of a collectivity of women assigned as the 'other' and produced in a gendered, sexualized, wholly racialized discourse [...] there have been many sites of struggle: migration, work, white feminist theory, and now identity and difference. If anything, what our struggles demonstrate is that you can have difference (polyvocality) within a conscious construction of sameness (i.e. black feminism).

(Mirza, 1997:20-21)

Therefore, 'black feminism', because of its concerns and approaches, offers a way to understand and analyze issues which are relevant to South Asian women and their participation in the public sphere. Black feminism also offers a possible reconceptualizing of the public sphere, and for these reasons I will be drawing on the work of black feminists (African-Caribbean and South Asian) since the 1970s. I will show why black feminism has been central to maintaining a fundamental challenge to mainstream feminism, particularly with reference to racialized social policy and legislation. The roles of sexism and racism are identified in Julia Sudbury's analysis of black women's political activism, where she claims that one of the obstacles to political activism is situated in 'the role of sexism in structuring the dynamics within black communities' (Sudbury, 1998:53). The importance of Sudbury's work is located in her critique of explanations that utilize culture as the main obstacle to participation in politics. Sudbury critiques the ways in which stereotypes are used for purposes of analysis, indicating the need to unravel 'the complexities of racialized sexism' (ibid., 1998:53). Racialized sexism is also evident in historical accounts of the experiences of black women. The discourses perpetuating racism and sexism with reference to South Asian women and the denial of political agency are discussed in Chapters Five, Six and Seven.



If, as Sudbury argues, the dynamics within black communities impact on the political activism of women, there is evidence to suggest that within the parameters of community politics, political agency has indeed been conceptualized as masculine (Layton-Henry, 1992; Anwar, 1991; Goulbourne, 1990) and the role of women unacknowledged. Similarly, feminists more generally have been slow in their recognition of the 'thorny issue' of black women's political agency. In community politics, although South Asian women have participated in community campaigns<sup>3</sup> concerned with racism and injustices of the criminal justice system, they have often encountered difficulties within a 'macho atmosphere around everything political' (Wilson, 1978:174). As I will show, this legacy in which 'the political' is defined as inherently masculine has been one powerful factor behind the designation of South Asian women as passive and the occlusion of their activism. Such a designation is not only related to the dominant conceptualizations of the public sphere but also embedded in colonial discourse. In turning my attention to this in Chapter Three I will argue that it is important to recognize black women's political agency. In Chapters Five and Six, I discuss why political agency is crucial in the context of social change *and* transformation – for South Asian women it challenges sexist and racialized identities. In Chapter Seven I also look at the complexity of political agency based on religion, as both a radical *and* conservative act requiring us to recognize its strategic and subversive nature (Mirza, 1997; P. Patel, 1997; Siddiqui, 1991) with reference to religious identity.

What follows is a discussion of forms of activism that challenge dominant ideas of what constitutes political activism and stereotypes of South Asian women's passivity. I will be exploring the existence of a multi-sited political agency that is

particularly relevant for my understanding of South Asian women's political agency.

### **South Asian Women and Political Activism**

Julia Sudbury comments on the multiple sites of political activism occupied by black people:

In examining black people's actions and decisions as voters, as politicians and as participants of grassroots organisations, they [studies of black political organisations and institutions] have shown that black people are active agents for change. Goulbourne (1990) has characterized this new approach as encompassing a 'view from below' which includes black people's own interpretations of their actions, focusing not just on institutional change, but also on the individuals who bring it about.

(Sudbury, 1998:51)

Sudbury's work goes some way towards expanding the boundaries of the conception of political activism with regards to black women's organizations that are viewed as being at the forefront of empowering women. Within an analysis of contemporary theories of racism and racialization, Sudbury examines how women become politically mobilized. She goes on to challenge dominant conceptualizations of political activism and demonstrates that a form of less visible political agency exists simultaneously with the more recognized forms through elections, political parties and trade unions.

When considering the political activity of South Asian women and their negotiations with political, economic and social structures, it is useful to highlight a number of factors that need to be taken into consideration. These are the length of residence in Britain; political activism in the country of origin; acquisition of

citizenship rights; positioning within and links to a community. In Britain there are established communities from the Indian subcontinent that have both citizenship rights and have developed their involvement in local, grass roots and official party politics (Visram, 2002; Werbner, 2002; Solomos and Back, 1995). The involvement of women is also evident from the earlier writings of black feminists which illustrate the range of black women's political activity: from industrial action<sup>4</sup> to campaigning against racist legislation (the 'SUS' law)<sup>5</sup>, immigration laws and domestic violence (Southall Black Sisters, 1990; ; Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1985; Wilson, 1978). Such campaigns for change have emerged from black women's experiences, the starting point of which is the community, stretching to the wider domain through which alliances and coalitions have been made. Examples of coalitions among black women include, the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), the Black Lesbian Group, Brixton Black Women's Group, and Brent Asian Women's Refuge. The political activities of black women have demonstrated in the past how they have engaged and negotiated power relations in the community, home and society.

The work of organizations such as Southall Black Sisters and the Newham Asian Women's Project, in the field of immigration legislation, domestic violence and antiracism, has raised the public profile of South Asian women. These organizations also provide a network; thus Southall Black Sisters (originally a mixed organization of African-Caribbean and South Asian women) has been able to make coalitions with other women's organization (African-Caribbean, white and Asian), and the civil and human rights movements (Siddiqui, 2000).

This was evident in the high profile case of Kiranjit Aluwahlia<sup>6</sup> that received extensive media coverage. It also illustrates that 'activism within the Asian women's movement, and within the wider women's movement, was at a high point at the time. Southall Black Sisters (SBS) and Justice For Women (JFW) organized large demonstrations and public meetings well attended by women and the media' (Siddiqui, 2000: 86). The coalitions and the names of organizations suggest that South Asian women are part of the overall feminist movement, but, because some of the issues are specific to South Asian women, Siddiqui uses the term Asian women's movement. However, in my view the concept 'black feminism' needs to be retained as often closure can occur through identity politics (Mirza, 1997).

South Asian women, as part of the women's movement described by Siddiqui, have been shown to act on their own behalf and for others. The question here, is what are the enabling factors leading women into organized feminist activism? South Asian women's political activism stems from gendered racialized inequalities. It is through 'action' or agency that social change can be instigated. This is the point argued by Amos and Parmar:

We have to look at the crucial question of how we organise in order that we address ourselves to the totality of our oppression. For us there is no choice. We cannot simply prioritise one aspect of our oppression to the exclusion of others, as the realities of our day to day lives makes it imperative for us to consider the simultaneous nature of our oppression and exploitation. Only a synthesis of class, race, gender and sexuality can lead us forward, as these form the matrix of Black women's lives.

(Amos and Parmar, 1984:18)



Indeed black feminist concerns are a combination of issues in terms of the consequences of different oppressive mechanisms for black women. The second wave feminist movement of the 1970s could not adequately address the interlocking systems of oppression – ‘race’, class, gender, and heterosexism. Nevertheless, second wave feminism fundamentally challenged what was seen as political. With the introduction of politics into the private sphere, through the slogan ‘the personal is political’, feminism challenged and destabilized the link between women and the private sphere *and* that between politics and the public sphere. Feminist thought provided a sustained critique of this issue through ‘consciousness raising groups’ and by transforming private experiences into public political forums. The private sphere shifted from being regarded as apolitical to becoming a focal point of political analysis. The relationship between the private and the public is premised on the idea that individuals’ lives are situated within specific historical and social environments. These conditions directly contribute to human experience and how we come to understand them. The premise of feminist thought is that women’s experiences have developed through the political, economic and social structures of society, and thereby revealed that the structure of society was one of inequality (Hartmann, 1981).

Feminism as a body of theory has gone through many different phases, developing in different directions, and in the process it has blurred the conceptual and political distinction between the public and the private. Thus, it may be pertinent to think of the distinction between the public and the private as ideological: after all men and women occupy both the public and the private. As a plural movement however, second wave feminism accomplished the task of

politicizing every aspect of women's lives. Michele Barrett comments on this politicization:

We have asserted the importance of consciousness, ideology, imagery and symbolism for our battles [...] Feminism has politicized everyday life – culture in the anthropological sense of the lived practices of a society – to an unparalleled degree. Feminism has also politicized the various forms of artistic and imaginative expression that are more popularly known as culture, reassessing and transforming film, literature, the theatre and so on.

(Barrett, 1982:37)

The work of high profile feminists within various political traditions serves to illustrate the focal points of feminist activity, i.e. oppression and patriarchal power (Walby, 1986; Hartmann, 1981; Barrett, 1980; Millett, 1977; Oakley, 1974). Additionally, feminism has developed different explanations to understand women's experiences, and it would therefore be more appropriate to state that a range of 'feminisms' have developed over time. However, the shared belief in the universal oppression of women by white western feminists failed to acknowledge differences of racial identity. The lack of acknowledgement of differences, race blindness, and the exclusion of black women provided the catalyst for a repudiation of ethnocentric theories advanced by white feminists. In this context the failure of white feminists to acknowledge other dimensions and relations of power has resulted in critiques by black feminists. The critiques offer a more critical insight into the Othering process, claimed by white feminists (Ussher, 1991; de Beauvoir, 1949).

Black feminists' critiques of the Othering process demonstrate the ways in which white feminists are able to construct black women as 'other Others' (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996). The objectification of black women in the west

and the third world is evident in earlier writings which present Other women as victims of oppressive and brutal patriarchal practices (Daly, 1978). These accounts reproduce Orientalist discourses of the past concerning practices such as *sati*<sup>7</sup> (which will be discussed in Chapter Three) and contribute to the production of a contemporary discursive environment in which South Asian women are positioned as passive and without agency. Commenting on the process of objectification of black women, Chandra Talpade Mohanty states:

Third World women, on the other hand, never rise above the debilitating generality of the “object” status. While radical and liberal feminist assumptions of women as a sex class might elucidate (however inadequately) the autonomy of particular women’s struggles in the West, the application of the notion of women as a homogeneous category to women in the third world colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks; in doing so it ultimately robs them of their historical and political *agency*. [original emphasis]

(Mohanty, 1991b:71-72)

Thus, if black women never rise above the status of objectification, what can we say about their political agency? I will argue that, although generalizations of the variety of feminisms should be avoided, categories such as ‘western’, ‘white’ or ‘black’ as political identities can be retained as tools of analysis. Therefore, I will be using black feminism as both a conceptual category and a form of social practice to identify black women’s experiences of their history, location, colonialism, racism and sexism. I will be drawing on the narratives of the women participants in this research to demonstrate that it is the dual modalities of racism and sexism which have provided the springboard for their activism:

*‘The main problem that an Asian woman could suffer from in this country is*

*alienation and isolation and [the refuge] is based on the premise that Asian women suffer from double discrimination, that of sexism and racism. That is the whole ethos that [the Asian Women's Project] is built on. This is a hostile country, a racist and a hostile country.'*  
(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

In addition to issues of racism and sexism I will be using Benedict Anderson's (1983) conception of 'imagined community' as a political definition which serves to illustrate the emergence of 'imagined communities of women with divergent histories and locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic' (Mohanty, 1991a:4). The political threads of opposition have been demonstrated by the ability of black and South Asian women in Britain to organize against and resist forms of domination – state racism, victim status in white feminism, and sexism within the community. They have avoided being robbed of political agency and as active agents have empowered themselves in opposition to dominant sexist and racist discourses.

The next section explores the concepts of 'empowerment' and 'resistance' in relation to the political activities of South Asian women against racism and sexism. These themes are then discussed in more detail in Chapters Five and Six and the discussion here helps to establish the ways in which my work develops out of and extends existing debates and perspectives

### **Empowerment and Resistance**

Empowerment consists of the development and awareness of several interrelated components: equality, rights and opportunities, capacity building, skills development, control/power over decision-making, and overcoming



discrimination (Karl, 1995). Thus, participation in politics in whichever form could be considered a partial act of empowerment. The empowerment process can be collective and/or individual involving the ability to organize, to act and to instigate social change. Although empowerment is a contested issue, Patricia Hill-Collins describes empowerment as a physical and psychic process of self-definition. She states:

Becoming empowered through self-knowledge even within conditions that severely limit one's ability to act, is essential [...] Because our actions change the world from one in which we merely exist to one over which we have some control, they enable us to see everyday life as being in process and therefore amenable to change. By persisting in the journey toward self-definition we are changed, and this change empowers us.

(Collins, 1991:111-113)

Collins' process of self-definition is particularly relevant with reference to the impact of gender, 'race' and class. She states 'this journey toward self-definition has political significance' (Collins, 1991:106) and its relevance cannot be underestimated. Yet the question remains, where can these actions which instigate social change occur? Is it enough to act individually or is it more beneficial to act collectively as an organization? Collins' examples of empowerment range from individual acts, such as song writing, singing and literature, to collective acts through organizations and groups. These actions can be understood as a rejection of a dominant ideology, which objectifies black women as the 'other Other'. This was the charge levelled against western feminist conceptualizations of black women.

If political participation and politicization are regarded as acts of empowerment in the self-definition process, it follows that forms of action are required. Thus,

the ability 'to act' in the face of oppression requires an understanding of women as active agents, in other words, women with agency. Julia Sudbury comments on empowerment:

For the organizations studied, the idea of personal empowerment of black women featured as a common theme. Empowerment was seen as encompassing a broad range of practical and emotional issues which I have grouped around three themes: self-confidence, education and economic development. The first area was the most commonly mentioned.

(Sudbury, 1998:61)

The three themes outlined by Sudbury refer to self-confidence in domestic violence situations; education with reference to black history and assertiveness training; and economic development, which refers to escape routes out of poverty through employment and entrepreneurial skills. She argues that personal empowerment needs to be viewed *alongside* participation in collective action to instigate social change.

Among the debates with which this research engages it is necessary to examine what is meant by the concept 'empowerment', and consider its usefulness as a tool of analysis for my concerns. Empowerment is often used in connection with women and it involves the contested term 'power'. Sociological debates have revolved around the meaning of the term, from 'power over' which implies control over a person or groups of people (Dahl, 1961; Bachrach and Baratz, 1970), to 'power to', 'power from within', and 'power with'. These last three meanings of power are considered to be generative, whereas the 'power over' meaning can involve domination through overt coercion *and* subtle psychological processes. The understanding of 'power over' is exemplified in

Amina Mama's study of black women's subjectivity (Mama, 1995). She shows that, for some of the women whom she interviewed, their identity had been forged through a 'colonial-integrationist discourse'. Mama designates this a kind of internalized oppression/colonialism or a 'dependency complex' (Fanon, 1952:99). The following is a description of "Mona" in Amina Mama's study, which emphasizes the impact of a 'colonial-integrationist discourse'. It illustrates how a discourse can have 'power over' black people through their experiences in a society:

Colonial-integrationist discourse conveys a message of conformity and an acceptance of white hegemony [...] As a child, Mona, a British-born black child, wished to conform to the dominant order as symbolised by the 'Bisto-ad. Father' carving the Sunday joint. In wishing for her family to conform to the hegemonic idea of a nuclear family with particular gender roles and customs, we can now say that Mona is recalling her position in colonial-integrationist discourse. She was being positioned by her British experience, which her family does not really conform to; she resented the fact that her Caribbean father went off to the betting shop instead of doing what she felt (and the dominant white society said) fathers should do on Sundays.

(Mama, 1995:100)

Internalized oppression is also evident in the high suicide rates amongst South Asian women. Statistics for South Asian women are higher than any other group within the 15 to 25 age range and is increasingly becoming a concern for organizations dealing with young South Asian women. Research<sup>8</sup> has been carried out by Asian women's organizations in an attempt to uncover the reasons for these high rates of suicide. These organizations, and others in supportive roles such as counselling and training, provide us with information of a group of women whose agency is questioned, particularly through undertaking acts such as self-harm. This makes the task of presenting Asian

women as having a positive sense of themselves more difficult. Instead they can come to be seen as women who have internalized their oppression. However, alongside the figures showing the high rates of suicide and self-harm among South Asian women, such women also have a long history of autonomous organization. This suggests that the picture is far more complex than any simple or singular pattern of 'internalized oppression'.

The implication of the 'power over' conceptualization as described above, is that there is a finite supply of power. Therefore, some people have less power than others do and a feminist understanding would position women as less powerful than men. If this is carried to its logical conclusion then the act of empowering women, through consciousness raising, represents a threat to those who hold power, in so far as it may result in a reversal of power relations. South Asian women's involvement in organizations which empower them is often regarded as a threat to the internal dynamics of the community. This is evident in the following statement by one of the participants working for an organization specifically for South Asian women:

*'Men have been determined to close down the organization [...] To be thought of as a homewrecking organization or pulling families apart is completely stupid. We aren't the cause of domestic violence. What we also offer is actually training courses, so if someone comes to and visits the resource centre, no one knows that the person is coming because of domestic violence. It could be because she wants to study English.'*

(Kanwal, Asian Women's Project).

Kanwal highlights not only the threat to men's power but also how organizations for South Asian women can offer an alternative to being the victim of domestic violence through the generative process of empowerment skills. A generative form of power is one which can create new opportunities for women because



'power is both the source of oppression in its abuse and the source of emancipation in its use' (Radtke and Stam, 1994:8) whatever the complex of social, familial and psychological factors. Some women enjoy seeing other women achieve and reach their full potential. Such pleasure was certainly evident among those women who worked in refuges and experienced women suffering from what has been described as 'internalized oppression' through being casualties of domestic violence. Other examples include empowering women with knowledge so that they are able to negotiate with those in positions of authority. The following are examples of narratives from this research in which empowerment is conceptualized as a generative process. This can be described as 'the power some people have of stimulating activity in others and raising their morale' (Hartsock, 1985: 223).

*'Empowerment is not only education but the women acquiring skills so that they can question society.'*  
(Surin and Maria, Asian Women's Project)

*[My job description] says it is empowering young people within a social and recreational context. For example if I am taking a young woman to see a councillor, it is a form of empowerment. This is the way to get what you want, I'm not actually going to do it for you, you do it but let's go through a process before we get there. From the feedback I get, that's how I evaluate empowerment and say that I have empowered that young person.'*  
(Sonya, Youth Project)

*'The satisfying element of my work is that quite often we are able to settle a number of our clients back into the community to lead independent lives.'*  
(Zainab, Asian Women's Project)

*'We aim to change a woman's quality of life. It never ceases to amaze me because when she comes through there, she wants to die. Give her fifteen days and she becomes stronger, some of them go on to have careers. At the end of*

*the day we help them and my job satisfaction is that I have given a woman the chance to change her life.'*  
(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

*'I actually wanted to help Asian women, I wanted to promote the kind of services that are around and have the kind of mechanisms and structures whereby they can access them. Where there aren't services, I wanted to be part of a movement to create services. When I talk about empowerment, it's not about grand conferences and seminars or sending stuff out and asking women to come to the seminars. It's about the little things as well. When we help women fill in forms, I don't do it and just get them to sign it. No it's actually about sitting down with the woman saying, have you actually seen a form like this? Do you know what kind of questions they are asking you? It is time consuming but it is also educational for the women when they go to places like the DSS.'*  
(Sofia, Asian Women's Project)

Power used in the sense conveyed in these statements shows how refugee workers do not lose any of *their* power through the empowerment process; rather, we could say that this form of power generates more power. In other words, women involved in the kind of political action represented by self-help groups construct their work objectives in terms of a narrative of 'help' and 'uplift'. The women 'being helped' are presented as being lifted out of the state of 'internalized oppression' as a result of their experiences. Some feminist theory draws on the Foucauldian understanding of power as relational and multiple and its existence relies on the moments it is exercised within social relationships. Thus, power is seen as 'a mode of action upon action' (Foucault, 1982: 222). Therefore, in the quotes above it is possible to view the participants' actions as a form of generative power because the providers (the 'helpers') feel empowered. This form of empowerment provides them with a further capacity for agency. Therefore, they have the ability to further a mode of action and self-definition, even if this is slight by the standards of a project of transformation. This generative power can be thought of as subversive of hegemonic

assumptions and webs of social relations in which the users are located. This is never a completed or finished process but a move in an interactive cycle of contestation and self-definition.

So far, the discussion has drawn attention to: firstly, how there has been a broadening of feminist theory through the challenges to the racist constructions of black womanhood; secondly, the conceptualizations of power that allow South Asian women's activism to be visible; thirdly, the approaches to thinking about how political spaces can be created for activism and how this is related to the process of self-definition. However, we also need to relate these to political agency. Therefore, if power is associated with resistance, an assumption is that resistance comes to be viewed as the result of domination or oppression. Resistance conceptualized as the opposite of domination means that it is quite possible to see concrete acts of resistance as defiance of authority. From this perspective it is tenable to view visible forms of resistance such as industrial action or strikes (Wilson, 1978) as the measure of agency. Another application of resistance is the case of black consciousness that changed the meaning of black to a positive concept through organized struggle and resistance. Stuart Hall comments:

'Black could not be converted to 'black is beautiful' simply by wishing it so. It had to become part of an organized practice of struggles requiring the building up of black resistance as well as the development of new forms of black consciousness.

(Hall, 1982: 62)

On resistance which is not so easily recognizable or visible, Steve Pile (1997) argues that resistance can also operate subtly in other spaces, not defined by

those in authority and thus more difficult to control. He states on the domination–resistance link:

Thus, it is no longer sufficient to assume that resistance arises from innate political subjectivities which are opposed to, or marginalised by, oppressive practices; whereby those who benefit from relations of domination act to reproduce them, while the oppressed have a natural interest in over-turning the situation. Instead, resistant political subjectivities are constituted through positions taken up not only in relation to authority – which may well leave people in awkward, ambivalent, down-right contradictory and dangerous places – but also through experiences which are not so quickly labelled ‘power’.

(Pile, 1997: 3)

The process of thinking about alternatives and resistance is captured in the following statement by bell hooks:

Our living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often improvised. Theorizing about this experience aesthetically, critically is an agenda for radical cultural practice. For me this space of radical openness is a margin – a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a ‘safe’ place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance.

(hooks, 1991: 149)

Both Pile and hooks highlight the necessity of decolonizing the mind of the internalized oppression/colonialism discussed in the empowerment section. It is a move away from associating political identities with forms of resistance which are obvious, towards the idea of subjectivities and the multiplicity of experiences and power. The writings of black British feminists from the 1970s to the present illustrate the response to oppression through changing forms of resistance, and to changes in structural relations of power and identity. Earlier



writing has involved calling on collective and essentialized forms of identity based on common experiences. Although there are many critiques of essentialism, it is recognized that essentialized identities can mobilize women. However, it can influence the uncritical adoption of a static identity. It is the challenge to universal forms of identity that bell hooks states: 'can open up new possibilities for the construction of the self and the assertion of agency' (hooks, 1991:28). Agency therefore needs to be viewed not only as resistance to oppression but also as a proactive force.

In light of the discussion above on empowerment and resistance, a pertinent question to ask in relation to women's agency is: what factor enables women to act on their own behalf and for others? Organized feminist activism in which women 'act' to bring about social change is not restricted to the binary of active and passive status. Instead, we need to view it as a liberating active social force. Therefore, gender inequality and the binary of active men versus passive/victim women can no longer serve as an adequate explanation, particularly with the emergence of newer types of 'autonomy and constraint' (McNay, 2000). Lois McNay explains:

[...] inequalities are emerging along generational, class and racial lines where structural divisions amongst women are as significant as divisions between men and women. Feminist theory has registered the ambiguous effects of these social changes through a rethinking of the concepts of gender, identity and agency. In so far as these concepts, inherited from first-wave feminism, are premised upon notions of patriarchal domination, they do not explain sufficiently the types of behaviour and action exhibited by men and women in their negotiation of complex social relations. In short, underlying the move away from what are regarded as relatively ahistorical theories of patriarchy and female subordination is an attempt to reconceptualise agency [...]

(McNay, 2000:1-2)

The proactive force of agency is evident in some of the women's narratives in this research, as the following statement made by a law graduate indicates:

*'It was a conscious decision, one, because I had actually read about [it] before I even applied to the Asian Women's Project, so I knew something about it. I knew they were pro-active and they did a lot of good work, and they publicized themselves. I thought I'd like to be with that sort of organization that's continually growing and expanding. They've done a lot of research, taking on different aspects of the Asian community, not just domestic violence. I wanted to work for an organization like that.'*

(Kanwal, Asian Women's Project)

Kanwal offers a rationalized reason for her desire to become part of an organization that was involved in promoting social change amongst the South Asian community. She has also recognized the differences in experience amongst South Asian women. The thesis builds on this by examining the impact of the concepts 'experience' and 'difference' on agency and identity through the changing lens of feminism - the enabling factor for women's activism. The thesis will also examine the role of historical discourses, racial and sexist oppression, and the role that religion plays in women's political organization, mobilization and agency. Given the focus on experience and agency, it was important for me to consider not only who to research but also the research process itself. The next section therefore introduces the research process, in particular the background to choosing South Asian women as the subjects of study.

### **The Research Process: 'Choosing' the Subject of Study**

In the previous section I outlined some of the intellectual terrain charted with feminist theory and politics that provided part of the context for this study. This

section looks at how South Asian women became the subjects of the study. Although I return to methodological issues in more detail in Chapter Four the following indicates the reasons why the work was undertaken. In choosing South Asian women's political agency as the focus of the thesis, the first step was to identify studies which have concentrated on South Asian women's political agency and political organization (Wilson, 1978; Southall Black Sisters, 1990). Most academic work on this subject has tended to give anthropological or cultural accounts for the apparent 'lack' of activity amongst South Asian women (Khan, 1979, 1976). Although there have been other texts from the 1980s such as *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (Bryan et al., 1985) and *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (Grewal et al., 1988), they did not speak specifically about the political participation of South Asian women. Viewed within a broadened spectrum that includes grass roots level activity, there is recent evidence of black women's (including South Asian women) political activism (Davis and Cooke, 2002; Siddiqui, 2002; Sudbury, 1998). However, parallel to the intellectual developments that generated a field of contestation to the discursive positioning of South Asian women, factors which are directly related to the issue of political activism have to be considered. Thus this research came about as a result of two factors which are linked to political activism: firstly, the low levels of political activity in visible electoral politics, and secondly, the limited amount of literature available on South Asian women. The broad objectives for the research were: firstly, to investigate the perceived idea that particular groups of women were not likely to be involved in politics; secondly, to explore the reasons behind the discourse which presents South Asian women in a stereotypical way, i.e. as passive and dependent; thirdly, to add to academic knowledge through a

historicization of South Asian women. The historicization process not only provides a link between the past and the present but it also contextualizes the positioning of South Asian women in British society. Historicization is particularly important in contradicting the stereotypical perception of South Asian women's lack of involvement in political activity. This third objective led my investigation to the Indian subcontinent where women have been involved in political movements such as the anti-British movement and, less predictably, the feminist movement and more recently within the Hindutva movement.

The broad objectives of this study described above can be more specifically identified as a series of key aims for this thesis. These are:

- to explore the idea of South Asian women's political agency through a historical and contemporary analysis;
- to shift the debate away from the victim status assigned to South Asian women through an exploration of their political involvement in organizations;
- to understand how South Asian women's experiences and the interpretations of identity feed into their political agency;
- to unravel some of the complexities involved in the construction of political identity, subjectivity and agency.

In the unraveling of the complexities, the thesis examined the role of racism and sexism. However, it took a new direction when religion was included as an identity around which South Asian women organized politically. Initially religion did not feature in my analysis but was brought to my attention during a conference paper I presented on the data collected. In the debate after the paper it became evident that Islam was considered to be an increasingly



important and powerful identity for Muslim women. Indeed during the course of the research I found that those organizations which were organized on the basis of religion were predominantly Muslim women's organizations. They had been set up mainly to verse women of the equality described in the Koran. Often the women organized with the consent of Muslim men and sometimes in the face of opposition. On the basis of the prompt given to me at the conference I decided to add religion as a modality through which to interpret the data. Therefore, in Chapter Seven I discuss in detail how the Muslim is positioned as the Other through powerful discourses. In addition, I also engage with the ideas of equality and rights through a discussion of the apparently contradictory relationship between Islam, political agency, and feminism.

My own awareness of South Asian women organizing politically was based on knowledge related to the existence of high profile secular organizations such as Southall Black Sisters. Recent media coverage of forced marriage and honour killings has heightened the organization's profile further (*The Guardian*, 2003; 2004). To find out about South Asian women required contacting organizations such as Southall Black Sisters. My aim was to facilitate a dialogue with South Asian women and more importantly to collect data for this research through arranging interviews with them. As a method of introduction to women who were politically active at grass roots level, I initially perceived this to be a relatively easy task. However, I also felt uneasy because I expected that they would find my inquiry a burden on their resources. Yet I had to access South Asian women and the opportunity arose when a colleague received a request from an Asian women's project for volunteers to carry out management

committee duties. I decided to get involved, for personal and political reasons as much as to gain research data.

Involvement in management committees requires constant attention to detail, funding and viability. It was a role I was prepared to take on, although from the beginning of the research not only was I aware of ethical considerations of joining a project but also the ways in which it would enhance and ground the research. The latter consideration was important in order to avoid any allegation of my lack of involvement in an Asian women's project. Thus, being part of a project validated the research. The experience also allowed me to witness at first hand the methods used to run a voluntary organization and the development work carried out. It also facilitated contact with South Asian women undertaking various roles such as solicitor and child welfare officer. Although the method used for this research is not participant observation, I was made an 'insider' and was able to observe and participate in the activities of the project. Nevertheless, it was nearly a year before I first approached a possible first interviewee. Despite my uneasiness about taking up women's precious time, the research was welcomed by them. I remained a member of the management committee for the duration of the research, and long afterwards. The project had provided direct access to women and subsequently to other women across London who might not otherwise have been available to me.

### **The Argument So Far**

I have argued that if the participation of South Asian women is limited within formal structures, their participation at grass roots level represents political agency. The recognition of political agency with an emphasis on multiple sites of political activism is considered to be crucial in the conceptual shift from

regarding South Asian women as lacking in agency. By drawing on the work of high profile organizations such as Southall Black Sisters I have shown how South Asian women's political activity has stemmed from racialized and gendered inequalities. The objectification of South Asian women has been challenged through black feminist involvement in strategies of resistance and empowerment aimed at overcoming the internalized oppression of discourses embedded in history. I have therefore suggested that the participants in this study use generative power to empower other women. This type of power subverts hegemonic assumptions and webs of social relations and has the potential to bring about social change. I have also posited the idea that resistance is linked to consciousness and that the conceptualization of resistance cannot be limited to a view of it as a reaction to domination or oppression. Although it has involved the use of essentialized identities, the process of resistance has also enabled the possibility of exploring the construction of the self and political agency.

Political agency is central to the thesis and will be examined within a historical context to illustrate South Asian women's involvement in political movements. This is achieved despite the influential discourses of Othering of colonial subjects and the sexist oppression from within the community. With reference to the research data, three chapters are dedicated to the analysis of the dominant themes of racism, sexism and religion. Each chapter demonstrates how South Asian women are able to claim political identities and exercise political agency. Although some political identities such as Islam may be regarded as contradictory to women's emancipation, the thesis will show how women have

been engaged in the struggle for equality. The following section therefore provides a detailed outline of the study.

## **Outline of the Study**

**Chapter Two** continues to trace the theoretical journey that feminism has made in the understanding of women's agency, identity and subjectivity. It engages with the debates around the conceptualization of identity, subjectivity and agency. Although it will highlight the complexities and difficulties associated with these concepts, it will also offer insights. I will also explore how a reformulation of agency is accompanied by the different ways women resist, subvert and claim identity. Through poststructuralist feminist understandings I argue that subjectivity informs identity. Such a shift in feminist thinking has served to highlight differences between black women. Yet the notion of collective and essentialized identities needs to be retained to show that identities of black women based on experience steeped in history and cultural identifications can be used to mobilize around.

I argue that the 'Other' (black women) can speak from the margins as active agents who resist dominant discourses (Hall, 1992; hooks, 1992; Bhabha, 1990; Parmar, 1990). I suggest that black feminism has taken into account the diversity of experience and difference, whilst retaining a sense of the collective. Thus collective identities based on shared cultural histories *and* the construction of multiple and collective identities are equally important. Therefore, the chapter highlights the ways in which South Asian women make multiple forms of identification, which may appear contradictory, based on ethnicity, 'race' and



religion. This process facilitates calling on essentialized identities as political identities and demonstrates the constant shifting of boundaries.

**Chapter Three** has a historical focus and is divided into three parts. It maps out the terrain through a historical contextualization of South Asian women's agency and identity. Part One explores the production of knowledge and dominant representations of South Asian women, through hegemonic colonial discourses beginning with a conceptualization of the 'Other'. The process of Othering is underpinned by a binary understanding that continues to be used by many contemporary writers. I will highlight the ways in which South Asian women have historically been, and continue to be, positioned as the Other, as a subject without agency. The intention is to provide a descriptive account, which explains how contemporary stereotypes of South Asian women draw on historical portrayals and positionings. In doing so it lays out the ground for the study and theorization of the historically racialized identity of South Asian women (Mama, 1995).

Part Two introduces the beginnings of a feminist movement and the nationalist movements' incorporation of an agenda to promote the rights of women. These two movements represent key moments in the history of South Asian women through their struggles to be recognized as active agents. The role of women in the nationalist movement was central and this section highlights the ways in which men struggled over the public involvement of women. Parallels can be drawn between the feminist movement in India and the west (Kumar, 1989; Trivedi, 1984) and therefore this section also looks at the similarities in

activities, the mobilization of experience and the challenge this poses to western feminism.

Part Three of Chapter Three looks at the complexity involved in the theorization of agency particularly when compounded by the role of religion. Religion has become a force which provides women with the status of 'active participants'. Thus, the power of religion is explored through the increasing popularity of religious identities across the Indian subcontinent and in Britain. The mobilization of women is contained within the area of increased communalism in both locations, with the Muslim positioned as the 'racialized Other'. The Hindutva movement in India is used as an example to illustrate how women have become involved in right wing politics in opposition to the rights based feminist movement.

Having established that South Asian women's agency is complex and that the past can have an impact on the present across space and time (Mohanty, 1992), I will argue in the following chapters that South Asian women, despite their negative portrayals, are active participants and have the ability to instigate transformation and social change through resistance and subversion. I will also show the processes which link agency, subjectivity and identity.

**Chapter Four** provides an account of the methods employed to conduct the research and situates the research in the debates around methodological issues. In particular I will be making references to feminist methodology and its impact on the research process. During the process of examining feminist epistemology, it will become evident that there is much to be gained and

learned. It will highlight the discussions around feminist research and the associated difficulties and dilemmas a researcher faces using this method. The chapter provides an account of how I have drawn together and utilized some of the methodological issues within a feminist framework of data collection and analysis.

The chapter is in four parts and considers:

- what counts as feminist research;
- the research sample, the interviews, and interview method employed;
- the methods employed in the analysis of data collected;
- reflexivity - locating the researcher, gaining access, power relations and knowledge production, reciprocity, 'race' as an influential factor;
- black feminist epistemology.

**Chapters Five, Six and Seven** engage with the data collected from the interviews carried out with South Asian women in London. The data is organized around three major themes, with the chapters focusing respectively on the significance of 'race', sexism and religion, and their impact on the lives of these women. Each chapter engages with the debates around women's activism, feminism and knowledge production. Through the narratives, I will illuminate ideas about the self, the complex role of agency, and challenges to the victim status of South Asian women. I will also consider the women's roles and their involvement in particular types of organizations.

**Chapter Five** focuses on the racialization of South Asian women and the ways in which it is deeply embedded in power structures. Drawing on our knowledge

of the historically constructed nature of South Asian women's identities, the narratives offer an insight into the impact of 'race' on South Asian women's political activism as postcolonial subjects. Here I utilize feminist theory by looking at discourses, identity and agency. The powerful nature of discourse is evident in the narratives, particularly where they draw on historical representations to show the invisibility of South Asian women within feminist discourse (Rattansi, 1994; Brah, 1987; Parmar, 1982). I will put forward the argument that, despite the exclusionary nature of the feminist agenda (for black women), the issue of rights and equality and agency feature as a major theme in the women's narratives. Here I will also draw on developments in feminist theory which expand the concept 'woman' towards poststructuralist ideas of 'multiple significations' or 'partial fixation of identities', whilst retaining the need for coalitions based on essentialized forms of identity (Butler, 1992; Mouffe, 1992). I argue that South Asian women draw on cultural forms of identity, and fix them temporarily to resist racism within organizations which are constantly undergoing a process of change (Sudbury, 1998). By referring to theoretical developments, I will demonstrate how the idea of a *continuum* can provide the conceptual framework for linking the individual to the structural processes.

Continuing the theme of equality and rights in opposition to the victim status, evident in chapter five, **Chapter Six** focuses closely on the impact of sexist discourse such as acceptable forms of femininity, behaviour and sexuality. Theoretical developments in the analysis of patriarchy will be used as a descriptive, *not* an analytical tool to show that despite the one dimensional and stereotypical understanding of South Asian women as oppressed by patriarchal structures, the narratives demonstrate an understanding of oppression and the



initiatives taken for facilitating social change (Pollert, 1996; Lorde, 1989). The research will also highlight the interconnection that occurs at the level of social relations, incorporating the idea of structural constraint and agency. The concepts of 'izzat' (honour) and 'sharam' (shame) require women to uphold the ideology of what constitutes acceptable forms of behaviour. Significantly, the narratives illustrate how women are able to challenge and subvert dominant forms of ideology by investigating what constitutes a 'good' and 'bad' women *and* a typical Asian woman (Brah, 1997; Phizacklea, 1990; Bhachu, 1988).

Also in this chapter, I will suggest that sexuality can be regarded as one of the multiple sites for agency, i.e. choice as agency as opposed to being subservient to masculinity (Rattansi, 1994; Brah, 1992; Parmar, 1982). However given the constraints within South Asian communities, sexuality and, more specifically, lesbianism continue to be regarded as taboo subjects. Linked to the idea of sexuality are the role of the family and the status that marriage confers on women. I will argue that choice of partner can also be regarded as a form of agency and that culture is subject to the innovative nature of human agency (Bhopal, 1997). Thus, the role of women in key organizations in London will be shown to play a major role in the active pursuit of equality, justice and freedom against multiculturalist understandings of South Asian women's issues contained within a framework of community politics (Yuval-Davis, 1999; P. Patel, 1997; Bhavnani, 1993).

Given the complexities involved in the theorization of agency, ***Chapter Seven*** focuses on the impact of religious identities. One of the main questions for this chapter is to what extent can religion be regarded as liberating? The answer is

complex and difficult. Importantly, I will argue, through a feminist analysis, that religion can be seen as an emancipatory tool and forms a significant facet to agency and political activism (Moghissi, 1999). However, one of the consequences of religious revivalism is a re-assertion of patriarchal control with a detrimental effect on women's rights (Sudbury, 1998; P. Patel, 1997). This is particularly relevant to Islam where it has also been argued that practices considered to be always and only oppressive may represent emancipation and resistance (Sayyid, 1997).

The narratives of Muslim women both in secular and non-secular organizations will be used to show contradictory understandings of religion (Moghissi, 1999; Kandiyoti, 1996). However, the reality of using religion as a subversive and empowering tool is also regarded as questionable, despite the appropriation of a feminist vocabulary of rights and liberty (Ali, 2002; Saghal and Yuval-Davis, 1992). It is in this context that veiling appears to be a focal point of analysis regarding oppression, domination and equality, making a link to the notions of shame and honour covered in chapter five (Pile, 1997; Najmabadi, 1993; Yeganeh, 1993). The last section of the chapter is devoted to a discussion around the use of the concepts 'fundamentalism' and 'Islamism' and the consequences they hold for women. This is followed by a discussion around the idea of 'Islamic feminism' and whether this can be regarded as an oxymoron (Ahmed, 1992). It takes into account the narratives of women interviewed and will argue that although religious identity cannot be overlooked, a complex and problematic relationship exists between religion and women's rights.

**Chapter Eight** reviews the original aims of the thesis by summarizing the argument. It also indicates the key findings and achievements of the research, and areas of further investigation. Despite the diverse and contradictory nature of political agency the research indicates that South Asian women are not only involved in acts of resistance to oppression but that they employ strategic claims to individual and collective political identities. The research provides an understanding that takes into account multiplicity of experiences and power, showing South Asian women to be active political agents in the process of social change. The study uncovers how contingent and multiple identities are linked to subjectivity and that political agency is multi-layered.

The next chapter develops the ideas outlined above on the contribution made by contemporary feminist theory to the understanding of South Asian women's political agency, identity and subjectivity.

## **NOTES**

1. For details of the women interviewed and the organizations see Appendix 1.
2. Black is used in recent studies to refer to women of African, African-Caribbean and South Asian descent. Black women's organizations are the subject of analysis in studies such as those by Sudbury (1998, 2001) and Davis and Cooke (2002).
3. Newham 7 (1985), Newham 8 (1982) and Bradford 12 (1982) cases are examples of young Asian men arrested and charged with violent behaviour in clashes with white youths and while defending their siblings as they were collected from school. The campaigns involved the whole community including women and girls.
4. Amrit Wilson highlights the resilience of South Asian women in connection with exploitation in factories, culminating in industrial action in the 1970s at Imperial Typewriters and Grunwick Photoprocessing. Despite the women's action illustrating the conflict between black workers and the trade unions, it also presents the women as political activists.
5. 'SUS' is Search under Suspicion. This was a law brought about by the use of a clause in the 1824 Vagrancy Act. Black women organized against the 'SUS' legislation which legitimized police brutality and their power to stop, search and arrest anyone based on suspicion.
6. Links have been made between different organizations by Southall Black Sisters who campaigned to free Kiranjit Ahluwalia. The lead was taken by Justice for Women (JFW), an organization that acts to free women who have killed violent partners. The Kiranjit Ahluwalia case attracted a great deal of publicity, resulting in her release from prison in 1992. The Crown Prosecution Service accepted manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility.

7. *Sati* is the practice of widow immolation. Chapter 3 explores this as a feminist issue.

8. Newham Asian Women's Project (NAWP) has conducted research on self-harm and suicide amongst women (15 to 25 year olds)). The result has been the production of official documents which are circulated amongst a variety of groups, from local organizations, Local Authorities to training specialists and academics. Similar research has also been conducted in the London Borough of Brent. For a detailed summary see Bhardwaj, A. (2001) 'Growing Up Young, Asian and Female in Britain: A Report on Self-Harm and Suicide', *Feminist Review*, Summer, No. 68.



## **Chapter 2**

# **Conceptualizing South Asian Women's Political Activism through a Feminist Lens**

### **Introduction**

This chapter highlights the main debates within feminism with reference to the production of social differences through experiences of marginalization, racialization, ethnicity and racism. It provides the basis for detailed discussions in Chapters Five, Six and Seven of the role of feminism for South Asian women's political agency. I will be charting how black women have been able to claim political agency through their activism. The complexity of this centres around the ways in which ethnic identities have been claimed, and I will argue that this does not necessarily have to be viewed negatively. The chapter consists of two substantive parts, each dealing with the issues raised by feminism regarding the question of agency and activism. The chapter develops the ideas introduced in Chapter One. Part One will look at the concepts of 'experience' and 'difference', and analyze the ways in which they have been validated and critiqued within feminist theory, again with reference to political activism. Part Two explores the link between agency, identity and subjectivity to show how different axes of power such as that constituted around racial difference can impinge on complex social relations. It will explore the notion of racialized sexism as an explanation for South Asian women's lack of involvement in the political process. I will argue that political mobilization is based either on the notion of collective or contingent identities, as well as multiple identities. I will examine developments in feminist theory that have moved beyond the binaries of active/passive and resistance/oppression

towards a discussion of the relationship between the social, symbolic and material worlds. Through an examination of research by black women, it will be possible to show the connections that have been made between the role of discourses, the constitution of collective identities, and also the incorporation of individual and multiple forms of identity. The connection to individual and multiple identities shifts the debate away from the notion that only collective identities constitute the political. Indeed, it is a combination of the above which provide the deepened context for my work and the understanding of South Asian women's identity and subjectivity that I offer.

## **Part One**

### **Experience Makes All the Difference**

The writings of black British feminists illustrate some of the responses to oppression that were manifested through various forms of resistance. As discussed in Chapter One, this writing has also contributed to a development of theoretical work based on the idea of 'difference'. Difference within feminist thought has usually been associated with the diverse political approaches used within western feminism, ranging from liberal to radical. It was thought that through a sharing of experience or consciousness raising, feminism could establish an identity through which women could challenge their subordination. Thus, feminist identity was constructed through collective action against oppression, demonstrating a commitment to women's political agency. However, as discussed in Chapter One, within western feminism, the different experiences of black women have been rendered silent by the normalizing effect of white women's experiences and their claims to the notion of universal sisterhood and the universal woman.

Critiques of the idea of the universal woman have been informed by differences based on 'race' (Aziz, 1992; Brah, 1992a; Mirza, 1992; Amos and Parmar, 1984; Carby, 1982). Black feminism challenged universalist understandings of the dynamics of gender oppression across an array of locations including the family, patriarchy and reproduction. The omission of black women's experiences called into question a feminist analysis that excludes an understanding of structural inequalities that construct differences between black and white women. Black feminist scholars have argued that an analysis of gender relations needs to consider all the varieties of women's experiences and to include issues of racism, sexism and heterosexist oppression. Although it has been recognized by black feminists that patriarchy as a hierarchical system of social relations can shape relations between and among men and women, they have also insisted on acknowledging how some men do not benefit from it (Carby, 1982).

White feminist scholars have argued that, through a study of the difference and similarities of women's experiences, new directions for liberation and social change can occur. Although differences based on 'race' and the universalization of experience have been acknowledged in white feminist thought (Barrett and McIntosh, 1985), an assumption by white feminists was that issues concerning black women and their experiences would be addressed specifically by black feminists (hooks, 1984). With reference to the different experiences of women, there are two aspects of the terrain of black feminism. Firstly, in connection with issues of 'race' there is occlusion with white feminist discourse. Secondly, there is multiplicity and difference within black feminism. Attempts to reconcile differences of ethnicity and national origin were evident in

the setting up of organizations such as the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) (Williams, 1989). Despite the tensions based on differences between black and white women bonds have also been created. The feminist movement in Britain has been active in its critique of institutions (public and private) where racism and sexism can flourish (Knowles and Mercer, 1992; Tang Nain 1991; Bourne, 1983).

However, if we acknowledge differences of experience for black and white women on the basis of structural and gender inequalities based on 'race', the idea of the universal or essential woman becomes obsolete (Spelman, 1990). Thus the category 'woman' has undergone deconstruction moving away from a homogenization of experience, static or fixed ideas to an understanding of subjectivities, including political subjectivities, as shifting according to discourse, location and positioning. Chris Weedon comments on the shifting nature of identities and subjectivities:

[...] poststructuralism proposes a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse, each time we speak.  
(Weedon, 1987:33)

Commenting on the dilemma faced by feminists regarding the category 'woman', Judith Butler states:

In response to the radical exclusion of the category of women from hegemonic cultural formations on the one hand and the internal critique of the exclusionary effects of the category from within feminist discourse on the other, feminist theorists are now confronted with the problem of either redefining and expanding the category of women itself to become more inclusive (which requires also the political matter of settling who gets to make the designation



and in the name of whom) or to challenge the place of the category as part of a feminist normative discourse.

(Butler, 1990: 325)

Despite this dilemma and the deconstruction process as described above, essentialized identities are used paradoxically to describe the heterogeneity of black women's experiences in Britain. Seminal texts such as *Finding a Voice: Asian Women in Britain* (Wilson, 1978) and *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (Bryan et al., 1985) located the experiences of black women in Britain illustrating not only difference *between* black and white women, but also *amongst* black women. A strategy of strategic essentialism as the basis for the formation of collective identities has meant that women from specific ethnic groups can be contained within a politics of solidarity (Spivak, 1987). The women interviewed in this study constructed solidarity on the basis of an essentialized ethnic identity, 'Asian' (Brah, 1992a).

Commonality of experience such as imperialism, colonialism and racism can also foster solidarity on the basis of a political identity such as 'black'. The shared structural positioning in British society as subordinate has meant that ethnic identities can be conflated to the political identity 'black', enabling women to mobilize against racism or domestic violence, for example Southall Black Sisters. In a similar way Patricia Hill-Collins (1991) presents black women as a homogeneous group who experience structural inequalities, locating their identity as being forged by 'the self, community and society'. In doing so, Collins presents an essentialized and 'authentic' notion of black womanhood. However, this idea of authenticity amongst black women also led to the development of the divisive nature of identity politics, authentic knowledge and a hierarchy of

oppressions. Donna Haraway describes this process within the feminist movement as a 'painful fragmentation among feminists' (Haraway, 1990: 197).

In the context of political activism, Mohanty (1991b) suggests that historicizing and locating political agency through a theorization of experience is necessary to challenge the universality of gendered oppressions. Her concern is whether experience constructs identity. She suggests going beyond personal experience to historicizing it in order to understand cross-cultural sisterhood or what she (and others) prefers to call transnational feminism (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997). Mohanty's notion of political agency includes political action as well as a contradictory understanding of the self that relates to the notion of multiple, contradictory and essentialized identities. It is the idea of location that has the effect of the past and present meeting - history and culture. On forms of identity whether individual or collective, Pratibha Parmar comments:

To assert an individual and collective identity as black women has been a necessary historical process which was both empowering and strengthening [...] It is also based on an assumption of shared subjectivities, of the ways in which our experiences of the world 'out there' are shaped by common objective factors such as racism and sexual exploitation. However, these assumptions have led to a political practice which employs a language of 'authentic subjective experience' [...] Identity politics or a political practice which takes as its starting-point only the personal and experiential modes of being has led to a closure which is both retrogressive and sometimes spine-chilling.

(Parmar, 1990:107)

Thus, on the impact of experience and identity, Stuart Hall states:

We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities [...] Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found,

will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

(Hall, 1996:225)

The complex links between narratives of the past, residues of colonial discourse and contemporary identities will be considered in Chapter Three. Although there are difficulties in presenting 'an experience', the historical contextualization provides a way into the recovery of the past in the service of political activism. I will argue that Asian women's positioning as victims and dependants in contemporary British society draws on a myth from the past created by colonial discourse. Chapter Three will show how women were able to play a significant role in challenging these stereotypes through their writing and involvement in the feminist and Nationalist movements in India.

The women interviewed for this research expressed a range of identities that could be considered essentialized identities, some steeped in history, others with cultural identifications. However it has been shown that identification with the less culturally embedded term 'black' has enabled people to mobilize against racism in Britain. Indeed the use of black feminism as a tool of analysis for the political activism of South Asian women is one expression of the interpellative and analytical potential of this term.

The following statements exemplify the naming of identities and positioning in society in their simultaneous use of commonality of experience and rupture:

*'I perceive myself to be a young black woman who encounters a number of problems because of the colour of my skin. I mean I use black in certain contexts but I perceive myself as British Asian, black Asian even but you know if you expect me not to acknowledge that I'm Asian, I don't think this is very*

*good.'*  
(Zora, Antiracism Organization)

*'In this society as a whole I'm black but at the same time I'm Asian because I've got a different culture.'*  
(Parvati, Asian Women's Organization)

These statements show that ethnic identity runs parallel to political identities such as 'black', an awareness that will be discussed further in Chapter Five. It demonstrates the need to retain identities that avoid closure through a narrow identity politics based on singular and unitary ethnic identifications. It is to this issue that I now turn my attention.

### **Reclaiming Ethnic Identities**

The 'Asian' identity expressed above needs to be understood in the context of the debate between race and ethnicity which has signified a move towards an appreciation of ethnic identities. Although writers may stress the unifying concept 'black' and its use in resisting racism, a focus on ethnicity has gained increasing significance in recent years. As Sharma et al. (1996) note: 'Ethnicity is in. Cultural difference is in. Marginality is in'. (Sharma et al. 1996:1). However, the rediscovery of ethnicity as a political concept holds consequences for political action. For some it has meant retaining notions of structural positioning and inequalities rather than opting for a culturally exclusive identity. In a somewhat despairing tone Sivanandan comments on the rise of ethnic identities:

The objective conditions are no longer there for African-Caribbean and Asian unity – and therefore for a black politics [...] The rise of multiculturalism in the last decade or more has



broken down that unity and replaced it with cultural enclaves and feuding nationalisms [...] recognising cultural segmentation, however, is not to accept it.

(Sivanandan, 2000: 423)

The consequence of maintaining ethnic identity is the lack of a unified front to racist practices. However, the 'cultural enclaves' referred to by Sivanandan have been welcomed by some writers who have gone so far as to suggest that the idea of a political identity such as 'black' has become obsolete (Modood, 1992). If this is so, how do we measure inequality? Amongst the sea of desired and marketable black identities in opposition to the cultural and religious saturation of the 'Asian' category, Heidi Mirza (1997) questions the viability and policing of the concept 'black' for political activism in the context of feminist activism:

But is the notion of a 'black woman' a viable concept? Identity politics, that ideological policing of who counts as 'black', Black or black, that has invaded our thinking and being, has without doubt, closed down our possibilities for self-definition and political engagement.

(Mirza, 1997:15)

Mirza's comments are reminiscent of fractures and ruptures in the black feminist movement when black feminist criticisms of the ethnocentric nature of mainstream feminism gave way to diversity, undermining the initial 'collective' goals of organizations such as OWAAD. Within organizations such as OWAAD black women recognized the primacy of issues such as oppression and domination. Although regarded as an example of an organization based on ethnic inclusion, there were major differences on political strategies and which issues should take precedence.

While not wanting to propose an identity politics which is essentialist or absolutist for the women interviewed and although some used the term 'black', the category 'Asian' holds on to the idea of culture in the construction of identity. However, in contrast to the view of people such as Sivanandan this cultural retention need not be seen in a negative light. Thus Paul Gilroy (1993) makes an important point relating to the role of a culture in identity construction. In the *Black Atlantic*, he states that to know one's culture could be regarded as a form of resistance to racism, enabling people to retain ties to their roots. As a result the historical and collective experience is not denied. Gilroy also comments that sometimes it takes an ethnically absolute and homogeneous culture to 'discover' oneself. To equip oneself with an essentialized understanding of culture can act as a buffer to the effects of racism and can be regarded as a cultural form of resistance (Bryan et al., 1985; CCCS, 1982). Could the same be said of the participants in this study? If culture can be referred to as the following, then it moves away from a static or essentialized understanding:

[...] a dynamic, and multi-textured entity, requiring 'thick description', not a set of fixed characteristics which are used to describe the normal from the abnormal. We reject the way in which 'culture' has been used in the ethnic relations literature to mark out specific populations and practices as aberrant. [...] culture is understood as a material and collective expression of social life.

(Westwood and Bhachu, 1988:11)

The participants in this study used 'culture' as a resource to set up projects aimed at meeting the needs of South Asian women and on occasions the definition or understanding of the term 'Asian' was widened to include other groups of women:

*The criteria used by [the Asian Women's Project] are to serve Asian women suffering from domestic violence, specifically South Asian women. The criteria have been widened to include referrals from anywhere nationally and [the Asian Women's Project] has also widened the term 'Asian' to include Chinese, Vietnamese, Iraqi and Iranian women who do not have facilities available to them. Although it's supposed to be an Asian women's refuge, we do take other women but we don't take white women. To tell you the truth we don't have the space, because then the whole political argument is lost. The whole reason for [the Asian Women's Project] to come into being is that we wanted a refuge specifically for Asian women. We didn't want Asian women to go into refuges where they couldn't identify culturally and linguistically.'*  
(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

An ethnic identity, 'Asian' is used by this participant to demarcate the boundaries of the majority group and other black and Asian groups. Ethnic identity is also constructed through religion and culture. Commenting on the client group, one participant told me:

*'If they can identify either with one of the faiths or with the culture of this group, then we will accept them.'*  
(Zainab, Asian Women's Project)

The process of self-identification with a culture or a religion is regarded as satisfactory for acceptance into a project. Thus, women's identification is with some aspects of being 'Asian', rather than a wholesale 'Asian' identity. The question is can the identity 'Asian' be used to centre oneself and is this the only 'self' that we know? Where do other aspects of our identity fit in, for example, the 'black self', the 'sexual self', and the 'classed self'? The whole process of identification with any of these identities exposes the complex reality of identity construction. It is not simply one identity at work, although essentialized identities may be the basis of organization. On the question of identity as an important and complex process, Pratibha Parmar comments:

[...] the question of identity has taken on colossal weight particularly for those of us who are post-colonial migrants inhabiting histories of diaspora, being cast into the role of the Other, marginalised, discriminated against and too often invisible, not only in everyday discourses of affirmation but also within the 'grand narratives' of European thought, black women in particular have fought to assert privately and publicly our sense of self: a self that is rooted in particular histories, cultures and languages.

(Parmar, 1990: 106)

A number of groups based their identity on religion and it has been argued that Islam represents an essential identity (Huntingdon, 1993). After all, if we were to critique this identity as putting forward a pre-determined form of agency, the Islamic agent's action is already divinely determined so she does not have to choose. This raises a serious question concerning the idea of social change: should women act to provoke a change in their circumstances? The answer lies in the fact that women *do* exercise agency in religious based organizations. In Islamic countries, women can also be considered to have agency in the ways that they use Islam to bring about favourable policies, although they are deeply embedded in power relations. This illustrates the contradictory positions that women hold in different societies. A fuller discussion is given in Chapter Seven where I explore the sometimes-contradictory role religion plays in the constitution of political agency. Commenting on the contradictory positions of women in Islamic societies, Arlene Elowe MacLeod states:

Although women are clearly assertive actors who struggle for better conditions for themselves and their families, their efforts often seem to produce limited or ephemeral results [...] women are both active subjects and subjects of domination. [Women] always play an active part that goes beyond the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance, a dichotomy that flattens out a complex and ambiguous agency in which women accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest – sometimes all at the same time.



(Elowe McLeod, 1992: 533-534)

The struggle she refers to is in Islamic states where women are seen to simultaneously resist and comply with patriarchal structures and hierarchies of power. Putting aside the question as to whether this pattern of resistance and complicity is specific to women in Islam my question is this. Could the use of religion be regarded as a strategic and subversive act to create social change and transformation? If so, then in certain circumstances political agency can in some ways be regarded as radical and conservative. Some of the women I interviewed expressed similar positions regarding the emancipatory power of Islam:

*'The Koran teaches that women are equal. Our culture tells us that women are not equal. The Islamic way is for women to learn and gain knowledge.'*  
(Mumtaz, Muslim Women's Organization)

*'I think there are a lot of parallels that can be drawn between Islam and socialism. The ideas aren't that far removed from Islamic ideas which were instilled in us as children.'*  
(Zora, Antiracism Organization)

The notion of equality with men, and the drawing on of socialism, indicates how women can indeed use religion to gain knowledge. However, the difference is that in Islamic countries women do not have a choice but to comply and subvert, whereas women in the West can 'choose' religion as the tool of emancipation. Contradictions in presenting Islam as a determined form of agency are also evident in the reactions against Islam by some of the Muslim women interviewed for this study. Conceptualizing agency then is a complex task, however, it is important in any analysis of agency, to remind ourselves of

its contradictory nature. Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu comment on this when discussing religious-based women's activism:

The relationships between agency, activism, and empowerment are complicated and often contradictory. Women's agency may strengthen systems of gender segregation, and women's activism may heighten identification with their role as mothers. Women's activism may also empower [...] but at the cost of deepening religious and ethnic divisions among them.

(Jeffery and Basu, 1998:10)

Activism then is not necessarily progressive and inclusive and it can effect its own exclusions. Indeed, difference based on religion was evident in the decision of some organizations to refuse services such as legal advice, along religious lines. One participant told me of her experience of this practice:

*'There are differences between the groups because I can offer my services but she [Hindu] would prefer to have a Hindu woman. This thing will never go away, maybe with the new generation we will move away from these prejudices but the women don't realize that we must stick together as Asians.'*  
(Shaheeda, Muslim Women's Organization)

The narratives of the women interviewed illustrate the interplay with multiple personal identities in positioning themselves in British society. It is a negotiation of possible identities within the parameters of political spaces and the ability to create such spaces which is important. Women identify themselves differently according to circumstance and/or they use a number of identities simultaneously as 'Asian', 'black' or 'Muslim'.

Within the black feminist movement it has been recognized that, although differences do exist amongst black women, a collective identity can be adopted in resistance to dominant discourses which position them as subordinate or

pathological. This process has been coined as 'a politics of identification' (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Brah, 1992a). Consequently black women's appropriation of the marginal space from where the 'Other' (hooks, 1992) speaks makes for 'a new politics of resistance and critique' (Hall, 1992a). It has involved calling on collective and essentialized forms of identities based on common experiences. Although a critique of essentialism involves the rejection of relatively static identity, the role this can play in the formation of new political subjectivities means that static identities can mobilize women, challenging the accusation that there can be uncritical adoption of such identities.

### **Reclaiming the Margin**

The 'margin' has been associated with the 'Othering' process yet despite the binary understanding of the concept of the 'Other' and the refusal by those labelled as the 'Other' to simply accept this designation, it has been frequently used in feminist theory. In particular the symbolic placing and positioning of the black female as the 'Other' has been reclaimed by black feminists (Brah, 1996). As argued earlier, there are two different axes of the Othering process, 'race' and gender. Yet feminists have been primarily concerned with the construction and positioning of woman as the 'Other'. It has been argued that we can regard marginality as a site of transformation where liberatory black subjectivity can fully emerge, emphasizing that there is a 'definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structure and that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance, as a location of radical openness and possibility' (hooks, 1992:22). The site of resistance has also been referred to as the 'third space' from which subordinate groups can speak.

The 'third space' is best viewed in the context of cultural hybridity, not as an identity as such, but an 'identification' through *Otherness*. It represents a site where 'translation' occurs, a dynamic process of disruption, of coming together through many complex networks of history and discourses (Bhabha, 1990). From this, it becomes possible to regard the identity of the Asian woman as following a meandering path, struggling with discourses, patriarchy, colonialism, nationalism and feminism (discussed in Chapter Three). The 'third space' emphasizes that women can construct multiple forms of identification, which may appear contradictory, based on ethnicity, class, and religion. It also allows for the calling up of essentialized forms of identity as political identities, as is evident in the participants' statements, to aid in the negotiation process. It can be viewed as the power to define oneself with the resources of the centre despite occupying a marginal position (Parmar, 1990). From the women's statements it is possible to see how they position themselves as the 'Other' and as active agents, constantly shifting the boundaries in their efforts to resist dominant discourses.

Although the concept 'Other' and experiences of 'Othering' have been useful, they are not without problems because they assume superior and subordinate positions, within a binary construction. Not only does the 'Other' group come to be presented as homogeneous and possessing a fixed essentialized identity, but it assumes the existence of a 'normal not Other'. The norm is the measure that Others are compared to, for example 'whiteness' is the norm and 'blackness' represents the Other. In addition, Othering has often been conflated with the concept of 'difference'. It is for this reason that a distinction needs to be made between the two concepts. Othering involves a relationship of power, of



negativity and of being outside the 'norm', whereas 'difference' within feminist knowledge is related to experiences (Brah, 1996).

The importance of the concept 'difference' lies in its ability to make visible the experiences (sometimes essentialized) of a variety of women, highlighting the differences between women. It does not necessarily imply a hierarchical relationship through inferior and superior positioning, as does that constructed by the Othering process (Said, 1978). At the same time, black feminist theorizing of 'difference' makes it clear that subjective feelings of 'Otherness' do not necessarily disappear completely and this is a point that Brah captures in the expression the 'inferiorised Other' (Brah, 1996). Thus, although South Asian women can assert their own identity, there is always the imposition of other forms of identity reflecting the power of some to define or position others.

## **Part Two**

### **Agency, Identity and Subjectivity**

Individuals can be positioned in various ways based on a number of factors such as skin colour. This is despite an individual woman positioning herself in a very different way. Although the following participant's language may appear dated it makes an important point in terms of her personal identity:

*'She was a white girl about five [years old] and she asked me, "are you a black lady or are you a brown lady or a white lady?" I said, "I'm a brown lady." She said, "you look like a white lady."'*  
(Samia, Women's Centre)

The girl in this brief exchange presented Samia with definitions based on skin colour. It is surprising that Samia did not suggest her own definition, for example 'Asian', 'British Asian', 'English' or 'Pakistani'. A range of possibilities

was available and 'brownness' is deemed acceptable. Being 'brown' does not inform the girl of anything specific, culturally or historically, about Samia. In fact, the term 'brown' signifies derision as Spivak notes when she comments on English colonialists rescuing 'brown women' from 'brown men' and their terrible fate of *sati* (Spivak, 1988). On another occasion (see Chapter Five), Samia identifies with the derogatory remark 'Paki' in opposition to being described 'white'. Although she reclaims the term 'Paki' she is still unable to offer alternative identities such as 'Asian', and her choice is on the basis of identities presented to her. As previously discussed in the chapter, if agency is linked to the 'self' and thought of as a product of identity, can we consider it to be an individual's ability to make a choice and act? The recognition of diverse, changing locations (and positioning) of black women pose interesting questions to the conceptualization of agency as individual and collective. The following section therefore explores the ways in which agency can be conceptualized and the roles that identity and subjectivity play in this process.

### **Conceptualizing Agency**

Conceptualizing agency within a feminist framework has involved using experience of a previously marginalized group (women). The reliance on 'experience' in knowledge production has been based on the dualist idea of universal male domination and female subordination. Experience has also raised questions concerning authenticity and the epistemological position which advocates a 'standpoint theory' (Harding, 1987; Hartsock, 1983/97). Despite the complexity and difficulties associated with the nature of agency, it is possible to offer an insight into what has been described as 'the dialectic of stasis and change within gender identity and its implications for a theory of agency'

(McNay, 2000:2). For McNay, a reformulation of agency is accompanied by a variety of ways in which women can resist, subvert and claim an identity that is emancipatory. However, identity has been conceptualized within a 'negative paradigm' of subject formation (McNay, 2000). If identity is viewed through the 'negative paradigm': that is, if the subject is thought to be formed through an act of constraint (resistance to oppression), it provides an inadequate understanding of agency. In other words, a wider understanding of agency is required in order to move beyond the symbolic and discursive construction of subjectivity that assumes the passive nature of a subject. McNay argues that a 'generative account of subjectification and agency', similar to the generative aspects of power ('power to', 'power from within', 'power with') is necessary and examines the negative paradigm through three issues: the relationship between the material and the symbolic, an examination of personal identity and the relationship between the social and the psyche (ibid.).

In connection with McNay's second issue, personal identity, if we accept that identity has the capability of unravelling the complexities involved in the relationship between structure and agency, then we can draw on this to develop an understanding what is meant by political identity. McNay's focus is a critique of poststructuralist thought on identity and she argues that if identity can be thought of as free floating and deconstructed, then it follows that, although some forms of identity are more durable, the subject becomes devoid of any history or 'social embeddedness' (ibid:17). This is an approach with which I agree and this is why it is important to historically contextualize South Asian women (see Chapter Three). She expresses the relationship between the simultaneity of identity and the coherent self as:

[...] the generative model suggests that the self has unity but it is the dynamic unity of progress in time [...] The idea of active configuration that underlies the idea of the formation of coherent selfhood offers a renewed way of thinking about stasis and change within identity beyond the dichotomous logic of the essentialism debate and also delineates the imaginative or creative dimensions immanent to agency.

(McNay, 2000:18-19)

McNay's analysis of conflicting debates makes it possible to explore diverse and sometimes conflicting forms of women's agency, and to investigate how women construct collective and individual identities. The following therefore takes into account the previous discussion of the ways in which black feminism has evolved through the claiming and reclaiming of collective forms of identity and agency towards a poststructuralist understanding which implies an understanding of one's own subjectivity. Thus one of the earlier black feminist works, *Charting the Journey* (Grewal et al., 1988), uses the idea of 'blackness' to unite and chart the experiences of a diverse group of women. 'Difference' in this text is expressed as non-static identities of sexuality, race and gender:

How then to express a complex journey such as ours - continuous and discontinuous, collective and individual? To offer up our experiences to others, to draw out the politics of that experience, is as dangerous as it is liberating. A potential that only comes to fruition when the experiences are collectivized and thus enhances the chances for the harmonization of diverse struggles.

(Grewal et al., 1988:4)

The text examines the contradictory aspects of identity, the idea of sameness and difference, and the negotiations that take place between different aspects of the self. It recognizes and acknowledges the changing meanings of the terms 'Asian' and 'black' whilst equating commonality of political colour with commonality of social condition, as the women in this study interviewed did. It



recognizes the changing location and positioning of black women and expresses identity as non-static. A multiplicity of approach can also denote non-static identities. As already mentioned, resistance and identity are inextricably linked with a range of acts which can be considered to be empowering. Similarly Parmar's work itself can be considered as illustrative of acts of empowerment and self-definition through her use of photographs to deconstruct images and representations of groups of people. She links this to the idea of 'difference', 'Otherness' and the plurality of postmodern discourse which can be used to accommodate the voices of the marginalized. The multiplicity of approaches used by the black photographers in Parmar's work highlight the significance of recognizing the need to assert a collective identity, yet to be able to portray individuals as having diverse and non-static identities, accompanied by a range of positionings within personal histories.

To understand difference, an examination of how groups such as African-Caribbean or Asian are positioned in society by historical and geographical processes, through various discourses that produce their experiences, is required. In other words, an understanding of how subjects are constructed in and through their experience is essential. This involves historicizing and contextualizing experience, to examine how women come to understand their experiences and themselves as subjects. To do this, it is necessary to explore how subjectivity is constituted. The idea of the subject and subjectivity are central to poststructuralist theory. Here subjectivity is thought to be contradictory; always in motion, always being reconstituted, multiple and dynamic. It offers an understanding of internal processes of how we are constructed alongside the diversity of social divisions, and how the processes

operate in different ways, in different contexts; how they coalesce in space and time. This is a more complex understanding of different subjective experiences and identity. Subjectivity implies personal and subjective experiences of the world: how we relate to and understand the world. In this way subjectivity, experience and identity are closely related in that we can give meaning to our experiences and understand them according to the discourses used. The meanings given to experiences are subject to change through exposure to alternative discourses. From these alternative discourses, new discourses and subject positions can be taken up. So, for example, dominant discourses of femininity of passivity and docility can be challenged by using alternative discourses such as feminism. This itself could also be considered an empowering act. As Chris Weedon comments on the understanding of experience in poststructuralist theory:

Poststructuralist feminist theory suggests that experience has no inherent essential meaning. It may be given meaning in language through a range of discursive systems of meaning, which are often contradictory and constitute conflicting versions of social reality, which in turn serve conflicting interests.

(Weedon, 1997:33)

The influence of poststructuralist theory is evident in black women's work such as Amina Mama's *Beyond the Masks*, in which she deconstructs the psychological constructions of colonized and black people. Mama's research is concerned with outlining how black women's subjectivity is socially and historically constructed. She also presents it as being formed from a collective experience:

I theorise subjectivity not as a static or fixed entity but as a dynamic process during which individuals take up and change positions in discourses.

(Mama, 1995: 89)

It is the shared experience that gives a group an identity. It is the shared Otherness that marks its difference from the dominant group and, from the view of structural processes, forms political identity. Subjectivity is thus linked to political identity and agency (the ability to act collectively or individually). The Otherness is based around a particular sign or marker, for example colour, culture, or religion, but it could also be around sexuality. A feminist analysis therefore needs to take into account the power relations that exist in a relationship of Othering and has to move beyond essentialism and personal experiences. In terms of political identities, while it is necessary to organize around some notion of identity, it is equally important to move beyond shared oppression to activism to overcome the oppression; 'partnership in misery does not necessarily provide for partnership for change' (June Jordan in Parmar, 1992: 110). What is clear in the work of writers such as Mama is an opposition to the conceptual triad of race, class and gender which victimizes and leaves no room for 'dynamic and creative manifestations of black women's subjectivity' (Mama, 1995: 146).

If we are to fully understand the nature of South Asian women's subjectivity and move from this to an examination of their forms of political activism then identity needs to be viewed as non-static. The non-static nature of identity is demonstrated by the women interviewed for this study who draw on cultural identities such as 'Asian' and politicized identities such as 'black' in different circumstances. The women also draw on certain elements of the past *and* what

this holds for the future. In this way a historical or collective experience is not denied, and by positioning themselves as Asian, despite the risk of essentialism, can be used to make social change. Thus, rather than a fragmentary self emerging, an understanding of the self as multiple layered is more appropriate, with the idea of temporary and strategic fixing of identity. The participants talked in both modes of collective and individual identities. Similarly, in '*Situated Voices*', Gail Lewis concludes in her exploration of 'experience' and its use by black women social workers that:

As 'speaking subjects', the black women in their multiple selves move within and across discourses as they communicate in modes of identification and differentiation with those who constitute an element of themselves.

(G.Lewis, 1996: 53)

In the accounts presented in subsequent chapters we can see resistance to oppression as 'out there' (structural location), where there is an appeal to an essentialized identity used to gain rights. Resistance can also be seen in the refusal of stereotypes through inhabiting a space then subverting it. This supports the idea of identities as non-static put forward by Mama (1995). It is precisely the fluidity of Asian women's identities that is complex; it goes beyond the idea of fixed and essentialized collective identities and subjective experiences as postcolonial subjects.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that the recognition of difference in experience and the importance of poststructuralist feminism through the deconstruction of the concept 'universal woman' has led to the development of new subjectivities



and identities. I have emphasized that discourses are powerful and that we need to move away from the homogenization of experience and static identities to an understanding of subjectivity as informing identity. The shifting nature of identities is connected to discourse, location and positioning. The role of feminism is crucial to challenging dominant discourses and offering alternative discourses. Thus I argue that political agency includes political action with contradictory understandings of the self. Therefore, identities can be multiple, contradictory and essentialized. Neither does the reclaiming of ethnic identities for South Asian women necessarily imply essentialist or absolutist identity politics. On the contrary, I argue that sometimes ethnic identities are used to mobilize women and promote social change, although in the case of religion this can be problematic. This understanding of identities is developed further in Chapters Five, Six and Seven where I examine the role of feminism and the impact of race, sexism and religion on the political activism of South Asian women.

Put simply, I have shown that through an understanding of collective identities such as 'Asian' or 'black' South Asian women demonstrate agency. Here the understanding of agency is conceptualized within broad parameters of what constitutes political activism. Black feminism however has also been shown to take into consideration the idea of diversity of experience and difference, whilst retaining a sense of the collective. The collective identity is shown to be based on shared cultural histories. I have suggested that a balance is required in terms of multiple identities and collective identities of Asian women which enables them to be empowered and be politically active. It is important not to lose sight of the two types of identity construction and there is no reason why

one or the other should be regarded exclusively as the domain of African-Caribbean or Asian women, particularly in a climate which has seen the resurgence and reclaiming of ethnic and religious identities.

Chapter Three therefore demonstrates the importance of history and location in the formation of identities, collective or individual, through a contextualization of South Asian women's experiences on the Indian subcontinent. Chapter Three develops a more informed understanding of South Asian women's experiences of political activism and political agency. An appreciation of these experiences is important because, firstly, it illustrates some of the continuities between colonial discourse and racialized discourses in contemporary Britain; secondly, it becomes possible to excavate and examine the emergence of a collective subject with political agency - which is the issue at the core of this study.

## Chapter 3

### Understanding Historical Representations: Political Agency, Resistance and the Role of Discourses

#### Introduction

The historical representations of South Asian women in hegemonic colonial discourses are important in understandings of contemporary racializing discourses and constructions of identity. This chapter therefore looks initially at the ways in which the historical contextualization of knowledge production, through the 'Othering' process, has been used to represent South Asian women as inferior and unable to act in the face of oppression (Said, 1978). The controversial issue of *sati*, will be used to illustrate how the South Asian woman became a site of contestation to justify colonial rule. In contemporary India *sati* remains central within feminist debates and has succeeded in raising important questions around women's capacity for agency and acts of resistance (Sunder Rajan, 1993; Mani, 1992).

The second part of the chapter explores how the idea of collective histories, the commonality of experiences and the multiple locations of struggle on the Indian subcontinent, provide the link between history and contemporary social relations of gendered postcoloniality. From the historical contextualization of South Asian women's experiences as colonial gendered subjects in India to postcolonial experiences as racialized gendered subjects, it is possible to present a shifting collective subject asserting agency. Thus it is through the link with the past that a deeper understanding of South Asian women's identity and agency can be achieved. The section will therefore chart women's involvement

in the Indian nationalist and feminist movements that redefined the public and the private and illustrated forms of agency. It provides a backdrop to understanding how South Asian women in Britain have shown the capacity to resist and mobilize in the face of oppression, refusing to be marginalized and 'Othered', often through the deconstruction of pathological discourses (Grewal et al., 1988; Bryan et al., 1985; Amos and Parmar, 1984; Wilson, 1978).

The political involvement of women is further defined with reference to the increasing numbers of women who are politicized based on religious identities. The third part of this chapter therefore explores the ways in which agency is asserted by women on the basis of religion on the Indian subcontinent and in Britain. Agency based on religion compounds the complexity of analyzing agency by making the uncomfortable link to right wing feminism and raising the issue of potential collusion with patriarchal structures and discourses (Werbner, 2001; Jeffrey and Basu, 1998; Kapur and Crossman, 1994; Mazumdar, 1995; Roy, 1995; Sarkar and Butalia, 1995).

## **Part One**

### **Conceptualizing the 'Other'**

The concept of the 'Other' has been developed predominantly in relation to European anthropological accounts of Otherness in Africa, India and the Orient contributing to ideological representations of race. It is understood as absolute difference between the self and the Other, thus 'the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self' (Spivak, 1985: 253). Despite the binary understanding of the concept, and the refusal by those labelled as the 'Other', to be othered and marginalized, it has been frequently



used in different contexts, ranging from orientalism and colonialism to feminism (Mama, 1995; Spivak, 1988; Said, 1978). In particular it has been employed in the understandings of woman as the Other and often the concern is about the legitimation of the dominant that raises concerns. 'Othering', especially in the terms of 'domestication' identified by Spivak, raises questions about the legitimation of the dominant group, about belonging and being an insider/outsider which are crucial in understanding the racialized diasporic experience of South Asian women. One participant in this study illustrates the insider/outsider position and the historical and emotional links to a place of belonging:

*'I have lived here [London] since I was twelve I don't feel a sense of belonging here. I think it's partly because I have a lot of feelings for my country [India] and my extended relatives. I don't feel at home here although it is my home. I live here, I work here and in terms of the material world, I have everything here but when I think about my future in terms of my retirement age, I don't see myself being here.'*

(Rekha, Asian Women's Project)

Indeed as Elspeth Probyn remarks:

If you have to think about belonging, perhaps you are already outside [...] I think that the desire to belong lives on, placing us on the outside.

(Probyn, 1996: 8-9)

The symbolic placing and positioning of a subject as the Other continues to be used, thus Avtar Brah in *Cartographies of Diaspora* sees herself being constructed in Britain as:

a racialised insider/outsider, a post colonial subject constructed and marked by everyday practices at the heart of the metropolis [...] the inferiorised Other.

(Brah 1996:9)

This suggests the simultaneity and continuity of processes that take place internally and externally, which create the complex network of subjectivity and identity. As a South Asian woman, symbolically it is Brah's body and mind that transports the history of the representations of the colonized, illustrating two intersecting axes of the Othering process, race and gender. Yet white feminists have been primarily concerned with the construction and positioning of woman as the Other. They have argued that women have been rendered powerless and silent through knowledge constructed by men (Ussher, 1991; Daly, 1978; de Beauvoir, 1949). White feminist projects have often been concerned to create knowledge specifically based on the experiences of women which are different from men's, i.e. their focus has been gender. Yet modalities of 'race' and ethnicity, as categories of 'difference' have meant that processes of Othering have been shown to have been applied equally to black women living in the west (Amos and Parmar, 1984) and to Third World women (Mohanty, 1991a).

Historically, the Othering process has positioned colonial subjects. Although the concept 'Other' and experiences of 'Othering' have been useful, they are also problematic because the assumption is in the construction of superior and subordinate positions, constructed as a binary. Not only does the Other group come to be presented as homogeneous, possessing a fixed essentialized identity, but it assumes the existence of a 'normal not Other'. In addition, Othering has often been conflated with 'difference'. Othering involves a relationship of power, of negativity and of being outside the 'norm', whereas 'difference' within feminist knowledge is related to particular experiences.

Difference is a concept that has been used to broaden feminist understandings and analyses of what it means to be a 'woman'. The importance of the concept of 'difference' lies in its ability to make visible the experiences of a variety of women, serving to highlight the differences among women instead of equating 'woman' or 'feminism' to only white, western women. It has the potential to avoid inferior and superior positioning, constructed by the Othering process. The idea of difference has been taken up by feminists, leading to the deconstruction of 'woman' as a homogeneous category. The ideas of difference, diversity and power as related to feminism were discussed in the previous chapter.

However, the theorizing of 'difference' does not necessarily imply that subjective feelings of 'otherness' disappear altogether and this is evident in the expression of the 'inferiorised Other' (Brah, 1996). It represents the result of racism, with her 'racialised insider/outsider' status expressing the feeling of belonging and not belonging within the construct of nationhood. For Brah, it represents a combination of experiences of living in four continents, of difference and despite asserting her own identity, the imposition of other forms of identity, the power of another to define. In a similar fashion Stuart Hall comments on this process:

They [colonialists] had the power to make us see and experience *ourselves* as "Other"...It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge [...]' (emphasis in original text)

(Hall, 1990:225-226)

Brah's analysis of difference as experience, social relations, subjectivity, and identity, provides a conceptual link between the experiences of women in India as colonial subjects and their experiences in Britain. This frame of analysis

questions the role of experience in knowledge production, given the multiplicity of experiences and subjects in history. Brah explores the ways in which women are positioned in multiple discourses that produce their experiences. Despite asserting the idea of self-definition, Brah maintains that power relations still exist and that those in power are able to define Others, impose identities and render them powerless. In colonial times, it was the power of the colonialist to define him or herself as the norm and in this vein orientalism was used to create a superior identity for the European. Said comments on the power to define as:

[...] systems of thought [...] discourses of power, ideological fictions – mind forg'd manacles – are all too easily made, applied, and guarded.

(Said, 1978: 328)

Despite major shifts within feminism it is often the case that white feminist experiences are regarded as universal. It follows that the white/western subject avoids being marked with a racial or cultural identity whereas the Other has been reduced to the 'corporeal or racial' (Dyer, 1997:14). The question is, if the black racialized subject is always presented as the Other, without which the white self cannot be realized, what hope is there, for recovering a subject within colonialist discourse with agency? This has particular implications for the study of South Asian women's agency and their ability to organize politically. With this in mind the following section examines the ways in which orientalism developed as a binary understanding and the ways in which South Asian women have been positioned in society.



## **Orientalism and the Construction of the ' Other'**

Europeans have created many, interconnected representations of the Orient, usually used to refer to countries of the 'East' or Asia. The work of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Orientalists enjoyed a high status in so much as creating the type of knowledge or information that placed Europe in a superior position. The process of inferiorizing Others is nothing new: slavery, for example, was justified on the basis of inferiority of Africans as a 'race'. In the case of the Orient, two factors were used to inferiorize the people, 'race' and religion. The concern was the complex inter-section of 'race'<sup>1</sup>, class and gender, caste and religion, all which contributed to the Orientalist discourse concerning India (Inden, 1986). The overriding feature of religion resonates in British society today with the Muslim being clearly cast in the role of the racialized Other. This is evident in the 'Rushdie Affair', following the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1989, in The Gulf War in 1991 and more recently, in the post 9/11 era, the 'War on Terrorism' and The Iraq War in 2003.

Discourses produce knowledge about others and position them, but they also influence *how* people experience the world (J.W.Scott, 1992). Similarly, if a discourse exists around the ideas of passivity and complacency for Asian women, not only can it be used as a point of comparison with the purported freedom and agency of western women, but it is an identity that can be reproduced over time by those in power and by Asian women themselves. Indeed, the image of passivity and complacency has been shown to be transported over space and time. Thus it becomes imperative to excavate from the mounting layers of discourses, the Asian woman who is not a non-subject but a highly significant actor within the colonial period, albeit placed in a

precarious position regarding her agency. Orientalism can be shown to be used, not only in the formative role of the racialized gendered Other but also to emphasize the existence of competing discourses (Orientalist and Anglicist/Reformist) for Indian women under colonial rule (Mani, 1992). The power to produce Orientalist knowledge is expressed by Lata Mani and Ruth Frankenberg<sup>2</sup>:

Our reading of Said defines Orientalism as an authoritative body of knowledge about Asia and parts of Africa that emerges alongside colonial expansion in these regions in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Put another way, Orientalism is implicitly a discourse of power that characterised a particular set of social, economic and political relations between Europe and its colonies.

(Mani and Frankenberg, 1985:177)

In India the role of the elite and clergy made it possible for the reproduction of dominant discourses about women, and for the British to exert their authority, through the manipulation of scriptural laws (Mani and Frankenberg, 1985). Discourses concerning *sati* illustrate this in the specific context of colonial expansion and colonial social policy formulation in which power and knowledge production are centred with the 'Orientalist' and the 'Anglicist' (reformist) (Kopf, 1980), these will be taken up in the next section on *sati*. Orientalists are described as 'sympathetic' to Indian culture whereas Anglicists wished to reform it. The Orientalist position is similar to the position of multiculturalists<sup>3</sup> 'respect' for different cultures or ways of life, without interference from outside. It is particularly relevant to the position that South Asian women found themselves with reference to issues such as domestic violence whereby 'community leaders' were entrusted with dealing with community problems. This is discussed in the empirically based Chapters Five and Six.

Although *Orientalism* (Said, 1978) could be regarded as a focused study of the Arab World, it is also relevant to India in that it can be located in a broader context, geographically and culturally (Mani and Frankenberg, 1985:177). *Orientalism* (Said, 1978) has been criticized for being a polemical piece, however the objective was to demonstrate how within this discourse identity formation occurs within a system of binary logic, through the construction of a centre and a margin, the Occident and the Orient. Identity formation occurs, it has been argued through a process that involves splitting and projection (Rutherford, 1990; Rattansi, 1994) between that which one is and that which one is not. Through its employment of colonial discourse analysis *Orientalism* (Said, 1978) illustrates the power of discourse on the discursive formation of the racialized subject. It represents a distinct method of examining the relationship between the construction of identities of Europe, the European and the colonized Other. Although this in itself represents a process of mutual constitution, the dominant centre is able, through power, to subordinate the margin, to project its anxieties onto this margin. Ali Rattansi comments on this process:

The Orient has thus been one of the poles of difference that has given Europe and 'the West' fundamental elements of its identity and especially its continuing sense of superiority over 'the Rest'.

(Rattansi, 1994:39)

The sense of superiority in *Orientalism* (Said, 1978), reveals the necessity of an *alter ego*, an opposite in a significant Other, in the construction of identity. Thus, knowledge of the Orient was produced *for* the Occident to maintain power,

domination and cultural hegemony *and* as a justification for colonialism. Speaking for the Orient therefore was common, as Said comments:

The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be "Oriental" in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth century European, but also because it *could* be - that is, submitted to being – *made* Oriental. (emphasis in original text)

(Said 1978:6)

Said's work captures how the Other is denied self positioning and illustrates this through the French writer Gustave Flaubert's account of his experience with an Egyptian courtesan. The courtesan is represented as silently accepting an image created by the dominant wealthy European, feeding into the consciousness of the West. Orientalism is concerned with the weakness of the Orient, presented as feminine; it becomes a geographical area that is penetrable, submissive to the force of colonization by the European male. However, the Oriental woman is not merely submissive, she is '[...] carnal female temptation [...] a disturbing symbol of fecundity, peculiarly Oriental in her luxuriant and seemingly unbounded sexuality' (Said 1978:187). This statement illustrates the depiction of the Oriental female, silenced, yet a dangerously powerful sexual subject. The fascination matched with repulsion is intensified by the observation of *purdah*<sup>4</sup>

The entanglement of religion, gender and colonialism is recognized in contemporary western societies through the different ways in which groups of people have been 'Orientalized' (Arabs, Indians, Turks) i.e. how 'social images of Pakistani women in present day Britain may in part derive from colonial representations of Muslims in colonial India' (Brah, 1996: 136). Similar



fascination is displayed by the French colonialists with reference to the use of the veil by Algerian women and their hidden and unobtainable sexuality (Pile, 1997). The debate around veiling will be taken up in Chapter Seven where I examine religion as a modality around which a political identity might be found and expressed. What colonial representations do however is to reduce the Other to the corporeal, evident also in the Indian nationalist movement in the exertion of control over women's bodies. The colonial voice therefore speaks for the colonized. It constructs a racialized and gendered identity of the Other whereby African, Oriental, and Asian identity is expressed negatively, associated with evil, suspicion, irrationality, gullibility, deceit, backwardness and uncontrollable sexuality. This is in direct opposition to European identity which is constructed with its dazzling 'white' characteristics of nobility, logic, reason, masculine rationality and controlled sexuality (Sinha, 1995). It is also possible to see how some writers describe the process as a contemporary issue. bell hooks comments on the African-American experience:

I am waiting for them to stop talking about the 'Other', to stop even describing how important it is to be able to speak about difference [...] Often this speech about the 'Other' annihilates, erases: 'no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain [...] I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk'.

(hooks, 1990: 151-152)

hooks describes people in power as the colonizers, those who can appropriate aspects of the Other which are considered desirable and marketable and is similar to the process of 'ethnicities in vogue' discussed in Chapter One with reference to aspects of Asian ethnicity.

As mentioned above, the 'Othering' process has been able to define men and women. Through the feminization of the Orient, the Oriental male has been depicted as a coward, coinciding with the contradictory image of the Oriental male as the oppressor of women. In relation to India specifically, it is through the brutality of acts such as *sati* in India that the Orientalists of the west produced *their* version of India. In effect, it dichotomized the world into 'them' and 'us', the strange and familiar, thereby emphasizing difference to the extreme. The accounts of Indology of the time were able to place Indian civilization opposite to that of the West, with Indians positioned as 'Others' lacking agency (Inden, 1986). Yet in the practicalities of colonial rule, orientalism clashed with the problem of accommodating a different civilization's rules and regulations in contrast to the rationality, science, liberal capitalism and democracy of the west.

One of the most important points so far is the ability of the colonialists to create discourses about the 'Other' (the colonized). Whilst recognizing the influence of Gramsci's work on hegemony and Foucault's discourse theory in Said's work, Porter (1993) is critical in the presentation of orientalism 'as a relatively unified discourse that over the centuries has been virtually coterminous with Western consciousness of the East' (1993:179). This suggests that Said's *Orientalism* constructs 'the west' and colonial discourse as unified and homogenous, leaving no room for the possibility of a dialogue between the two. Instead, *Orientalism* (Said, 1978) focuses on the formation of a uniform, hegemonic discourse which does not allow an exploration of counter-hegemonic discourses.

Porter (1993) illustrates the existence of counter-hegemonic discourses in thirteenth century travel literature, Marco Polo in *The Travels*, and the twentieth century writing of T. E. Lawrence<sup>5</sup>, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. He suggests a re-reading of both to show the difference in expression at different times in history. The *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is an eclectic piece of prose, a personal narrative, and is used by Porter as an example of something which has been effectively silenced as a counter hegemonic text in the orientalist discourse, despite it being written from a position of power. This position was powerful because it could put forward racial doctrines of the time. For Porter, it illustrates Lawrence's resistance to being constructed as a subject of British imperialism.

Following hooks, Porter's critique develops the idea of the centre<sup>6</sup> and the margin, where, the margin itself can also be regarded as the site of resistance, where new identities are created, a space not accounted for in *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). The counter hegemonic discourses Porter refers to challenge Said and others. Indeed as Said himself argues, that even *within* 'the orientalist canon' there is no simple 'consolidated vision' (Said, 1993). Thus any careful analysis of colonial discourse must pay attention to those alternative versions.

An issue of equal, if not greater, importance for the concerns discussed here is the omission of gender and class from some of the discussion of colonial discourse (Hall, 2002; R.Lewis, 1996; McLintock, 1995). The question is whether the narratives produced at the margins can be regarded as authentic narratives if class and gender are omitted from the analysis. It further begs the question, whose voice is being heard from the margins? If it is not the subaltern's voice, whose is it? If there is doubt around the counter hegemonic status of the 'subaltern', what is there left to say? If the two terms, subaltern and

elite represent extremes, a person can only be one or the other. However, if the purpose of subaltern studies has not been to create a binary of oppositions (a polemic of the oppressed against the dominant) we need to develop the dynamic relationship between the two concepts. Due to the complex relationship between different groups in colonial India, could an elite group of women be regarded 'subaltern' in their relatively disadvantaged position as female? The question of who is the true subaltern is a concept fraught with difficulties, however as the following section demonstrates, it has been used to analyze women's position in Indian society (Spivak, 1985).

### **The South Asian Woman as Subaltern**

The concept 'subaltern', coined by Gramsci, has been used to refer to writers involved in Subaltern Studies. They have been influential in putting forward a history of India which is an *alternative* to both the elitist nationalist or colonial version put forward in the past (Guha, 1988 and 1998; Spivak, 1988). The alternative historiography demonstrates the involvement of the 'subaltern masses' in the history of India, and their efforts in resisting colonial rule. It represents a reworking of Indian history which avoids running 'the risk of just being a mirror opposite the writing whose tyranny it disputes' (Said, 1988:viii).

However, if the work of the Subaltern Studies group is seen to be an expression of those who are disadvantaged, the question is, has the voice of subaltern Indian woman been retrieved from the history of silence? And is the voice authentic? Similar questions can be posed around the voices of African-Caribbean and Asian women in the west, particularly with reference to feminism. To be considered subaltern, one's voice is supposedly suppressed



and oppressed by colonial and elite discourses. To be engaged in writing therefore would presumably nullify this position since 'voice' and speech are privileged as reflective of unmediated 'truth'. Although the authenticity of work written by privileged, middle class Indian women in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century has been questioned (Spivak, 1985), Teresa Hubel (1996) puts forward a profound criticism related to a discourse of authenticity:

In order to examine meaningfully the texts produced by women writers of the elite groups in colonial India, it seems important to get rid of this discourse of authenticity. It is too tautological in its direction. Eventually, after eliminating all inauthentic voices such as British imperialist and Indian nationalist ones, we are left with the subaltern, who cannot speak because s/he ceases to be a subaltern the moment s/he speaks. We cannot retrieve the male or female subaltern; we can only enshrine them in their irreducibility. I distrust this mystification of the subaltern because it necessarily renders inauthentic and dismissable every voice on the very basis that it does speak, with the exception of course, of the critic's voice.

(Hubel, 1996:120)

Despite such concerns, Spivak (1988) asks repeatedly 'can the subaltern speak?'. To highlight the woman question, she gives a detailed account of the practice of *sati* and engages in a debate that moves backwards and forwards in time, with the result that the Indian woman remains voiceless within the insurmountable patriarchal and colonial oppression. The task of retrieving the lost voice in history is assigned to the female intellectual. For Spivak, 'the subaltern cannot speak'. Where does this leave the idea of authenticity?

If the term authenticity is understood as the ability to create a narrative that has discursive authority, whether as colonial or anticolonial, and not be assimilated into either the colonial or nationalist histories, then 'subalterns' cannot speak.

Therefore, in order not to 'dismiss every voice on the basis that it speaks', a different understanding of authenticity is required, i.e. we need to cast the analytic eye to find evidence of subordinated narratives that might suggest agency and therefore speak to registers of oppositional consciousness and practices. One of these groups could therefore include the 'women writers of the elite groups in India' (Hubel, 1996: 120). This is an important point as it allows us to see the historical discourses of the 'South Asian woman' and her ability to speak. This understanding also enables us to trace the construction of discourses of South Asian women in Britain today. The ability of South Asian women to speak is evident in Chapter Two where I outlined the role of South Asian women as writers and activists within the black feminist movement in Britain.

Despite evidence of such agency (both historically and in the contemporary period) power relations between the colonizer and colonized existed in the context of Orientalist (colonialist) knowledge production, effectively rendering all the population without agency. What I want to consider is how women are represented within these power relations. It is in this context that the issue of *sati* will be examined both as a historically specific act and as a contemporary phenomenon. It is central when looking at the contemporary representations of Asian women and exploring the idea of agency with the interlocking factors of race, caste, gender, religion and colonialism.

The next section will therefore briefly consider the debates around the practice of *sati* and how the Indian woman (usually high caste Hindu) became a site of contestation for the colonialists and the colonized. In the nineteenth century, the

Indian woman became the embodiment of the nation, a site where the colonialists exerted their superiority and constructed the identity of India.

### ***Sati* and the Question of Agency**

*Sati* brings to the fore the 'woman question' in India and through her examination of colonial, missionary and elite discourse perspectives in both India and Britain, Lata Mani's work offers some understanding of the place of gender in colonial India (Mani, 1989). Her concern is not only with the concept of agency in the act of *sati* but also with positioning and locating women's relation to the production of knowledge. *Sati* is presented as an historical and contemporary phenomenon, and as an issue taken up by feminists in the west and in India. As a contemporary issue in India, the occurrence of *sati* such as the highly publicized Roop Kanwar case in 1987 will be used to highlight the discourse explaining this act ranging from traditionalist, religious to feminist discourses. *Sati* demonstrates the importance of colonial (Orientalist) discourses about Indian women in the construction of contemporary knowledge in the west. It also points to the construction of 'the third world woman' as lacking agency in western feminist discourse.

The aspects of racialization, colonialism and as a position as a postcolonial subject are brought together powerfully in Avtar Brah's statement referred to at the beginning of this chapter and it demands the recognition of history in the construction of the female, postcolonial subject. The main aim is to consider the idea of agency by transporting the issue of *sati* through time and space. The intention is to demonstrate how, from colonial representations we are able to derive some of the contemporary images of Asian women and explain discourses through which Asian women's agency is constructed.

Mani<sup>7</sup> (1989) identifies the debate on *sati* as a turning point in the attention given to the position of women in India and examines official and indigenous discourses on the subject. Her interest is in the assumptions made about *sati*, society, and the position of women. Mani questions the concepts of religion and tradition and whether through various discourses, women have simply been regarded as the 'currency' in the debate. So what value has been placed on the 'woman question' and indeed the woman herself? The British in India in the nineteenth century observed the oppression of, and the lack of value placed on women, and were successfully able to use it to justify their superiority. By presenting the Indian woman, within colonial discourse as inferior and devalued, they were able to inferiorize Indian culture, i.e. to represent India and the Other to the British through the use of a binary logic. The moral superiority of the British and the justification of colonial rule lay in the maintenance of India as a traditional society, with 'barbaric' acts of *sati* and the role of women being central.

Implicated in this web of power, the South Asian woman was not usually acknowledged except in terms of her mystical sexuality. Agency if at all recognized, is expressed as masculine forms or based around the issue of *sati* when a widow would 'decide' to immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Parallels can be drawn between these types of agency in colonial India and the multiculturalist understanding of Asian women living in Britain. The multiculturalist understanding of South Asian women's issues and the role of so-called community leaders will be discussed in Chapter Five. Suffice it to say here that South Asian women in Britain have resisted multiculturalist understandings of issues such as domestic violence and honour killings.



However, it is the ability of Indian women under colonialism to write and the ability of Asian women living in contemporary British society to organize under oppressive conditions which can be regarded as forms of resistance to oppressive mechanisms (Siddiqui, 2000; P.Patel, 1997; Wilson, 1978).

The double subjugation (patriarchy and colonialism) of women in colonial India is expressed by Teresa Hubel when she states:

It is clear, then, that the conservative imperialist bent on holding on to power in India had a stake in constructions of the Indian woman as oppressed both by her society and her husband but as benefiting from British rule even in her double subjugation. She was a person to be pitied and patronised but was not to be perceived as so victimised that her situation necessitated immediate corrective action.

(Hubel 1996:111)

The dismissal of religion and Indian culture is also evident in British women's writings of the nineteenth century. This is exemplified through the work of Mary Francis Billington (1895). She powerfully constructs the 'difference' between the Indian woman and the western woman in terms of the sexuality of the Indian woman that effectively renders her as an opposite to the Western woman. The Indian woman is sexualized, presented as one who cannot control her sexuality, entering into marriage and thereby inevitably experiencing widowhood. Whereas, the Western woman is presented as controlled and chooses to remain unmarried. Billington's attempts to sexualize and denigrate the Indian woman are thought of as a 'solution' in understanding why they are oppressed. It is Orientalist informed writings such as these which set India apart as the Other with its essential differences. In this case it is the sexualized Indian woman; in *Orientalism*, it was the Egyptian courtesan. In these writings,

there is evidence of patronizing and pitying the Indian woman who is subjected to an early marriage, widowhood and *sati*. The reformist solution advocated the subjugation of Indian people, to 'save' the women from such oppressive practices and early marriage<sup>8</sup>. The questions of agency, free will and the role of religion are raised in an act such as *sati*<sup>9</sup>. The Hindu religion forbids suicide, except for widows, who can claim honour and is rewarded in the after life. In the case of advocating that a woman's will was involved in *sati*, Spivak (1988) cites a chilling verse from religious scriptures stating that a female can never release herself from the cycle of lives unless she commits *sati*. The suicidal act is thought to invoke, contradictorily, 'agency'. The female destroys her body, the reward to be born as a man or never to be born again. The punishment to be born over again as a woman.

However, despite Spivak's assertions that the voice of the subaltern, particularly the female, is not heard, there were Indian female writers (late nineteenth century and early twentieth century), usually educated, high caste and privileged women. Teresa Hubel in her analysis of texts by two Indian female writers of the nineteenth century states:

For [...] Indian women writing within the confines of imperialism and patriarchy - it comes down to a precarious balancing act, as they strive to maintain some measure of allegiance to their indigenous systems, while continuing to criticize those aspects of their social and cultural situations that they have found intolerable [...] Still we must recognize that, as Others, Indian women had to consolidate two selves, the self constructed by British imperialism and the self engendered by Indian patriarchy.

(Hubel 1996:146)

This illustrates the situation that Indian women found themselves in with reference to their writing and is very similar to the situation of contemporary Indian feminists in India commenting on *sati*, described by (Sunder Rajan, 1993). The similarity is also recognized in Lata Mani's work in which she relates the response of her work on *sati* in Britain. Both writers illustrate that parallels can be drawn between the situation of the past and the sort of issues Asian women were and are faced with in terms of the rejection of certain practices whilst maintaining a link with an ethnic identity (P. Patel, 1997).

It is the subjectivity of these women, their reality and understanding of the world which is central. It is the experiences of these women, committed to paper which elevates them from the status of subaltern to colonial subject, accompanied by the possibility of resistance (Hubel, 1996). But the question of the subaltern crops up again when we remember that many of the texts are written by high caste Indian women. Thus we can ask: who do they represent? Hubel cites the example of the nineteenth century Indian writer, Pandita Ramabai<sup>10</sup>, a social reformer and author of *The High Caste Hindu Woman* in 1887, in which she rejects the construction of femininity imposed on Indian women by the west and India. Ramabai provides an insight into the double oppression felt by Indian women, that of the Empire and of patriarchy. In doing so, she becomes a representative for all Indian women who are suffering under a brutal regime of centuries old customs. However, her work is exclusively based on the high caste Hindu woman and she constructs the Indian woman for the west as having a collective identity. Ramabai highlights how the British were able to rule successfully through the maintenance of a strict patriarchal system. Her experiences of English life in Cheltenham and Wantage illustrates the

continuing colonial attitude and perceptions of South Asian women (Burton, 1995).

### ***Sati* as a Contemporary Issue**

If the issue of *sati* raised important questions about agency in the nineteenth century, the practice still provides a pivot for debates about the struggle over rights, participation, autonomy and agency. The occurrence of *sati* in contemporary India is a complex issue. It highlights the similarity in position of the postcolonial State and the colonial powers with reference to such an act. On the one hand there is the traditional force defending the act as part of tradition and religion, and on the other hand, a liberal force protecting the rights of women. The conflict here is between the right to life as written into the Constitution and the freedom of religious practice. It is also parallel to the predicament of Western liberals in Britain, concerning multiculturalist understandings of Asian women's issues mentioned above.

Importantly, for postcolonial writers such as Lata Mani and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan it is the question of agency that is of central concern. This is expressed eloquently by Sunder Rajan:

The problematic remains insidiously coercive in framing the issue of female subjectivity. In the representations of *sati* in contemporary India that I shall be discussing shortly the subjectivity of the woman who commits *sati* remains a crucial issue; female subjectivity has in its turn hinged on the question: Was the *sati* voluntary? Or was the woman forced upon the pyre? These stark alternatives were posed as an aspect of British intervention in the issue in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

(Sunder Rajan 1993:18).



Not only does this highlight the similarities in the way that *sati* has been examined as an issue for the postcolonial state, it also highlights the complexity of such an act by using the example of Roop Kanwar, a middle class, educated young woman, who committed *sati* in 1987. Rajan's account points to the problems of addressing *sati* firstly as murder that implies coercion. By implication if a *sati* is regarded as 'voluntary' then it becomes an acceptable act. However, the acceptance of a 'voluntary' *sati* may mean that the 'choice' of death is preferable to the harsh reality of being a widow in Indian society. Secondly, if 'freedom of choice' to commit a *sati* is accepted, then the 'dubious state of existential suicide' (Sunder Rajan, 1993) must also be accepted. Thirdly, by regarding the widow as a victim, it denies her agency, a problem encountered by feminist analyses.

The central issue concerns the conceptualization of agency that Mani (1989) argues has remained undertheorized within feminist debates. In connection with *sati*, it is the issue of the widow's will which is of concern. If agency is discussed around the terms of 'consent' and 'coercion', it is unhelpful because defenders of *sati* emphasize its voluntary nature whilst opponents emphasize coercion and question the notion of 'consent'. However, third world feminists' concerns with 'location' complicates the matter still further, since it points to connections between how 'agency' is conceptualized and the 'locations' from which one speaks and develops a politics. Mani situates herself as a post-colonial third world feminist and in doing so she constructs a link between cultures and histories, dissolving the assumption that the west and the east exist as two separate spaces (Mohanty (1992)). It is precisely the link between cultures and histories that allows an understanding of women's agency through an historical contextualization. To overcome the problem of conceptualizing east and west

as separate spaces, Mani (1992) uses a definition of the space of politics to discuss *sati* in colonial India. Mani's analysis also uses the movement of cultures, shifting configurations of meaning, multiple locations and specific modes of knowing as the means by which to designate specific locales. This analysis utilizes Mohanty's argument that location is not fixed but requires exploration of 'the historical, geographical, cultural, psychic and imaginative boundaries which provide the ground for political definition and self definition for contemporary US feminists' (Mohanty, 1992:74). This location is 'a temporality of struggle, characterized by multiple locations and non synchronous processes of movement between culture, languages and complex configurations of meaning and power' (ibid.). The implication of this is that 'agency' is now understood not as a simple absolute condition but rather as a dynamic space of manoeuvre within and between discourses, places and spaces, and institutional and cultural norms and practices.

Mohanty (1992) points to a politics which is not bounded by geography, it transcends national borders and reaches out to global diasporas whereby women can act on a common ground or through the use of a political identity, whilst retaining a sense of their location. The implication is a politics that is in motion, reconstituting itself depending on the experiences of marginalization or exclusion. Therefore a connection can be made between what appear to be local politics and politics at the global level. It is for this reason that I have contextualized the construct of the Asian woman through *sati* because it has implications for the feminist project in contemporary British society, concerning mainly resistance and the assertion of agency by South Asian women. Also if *sati* exemplifies assertion or the lack of agency, or if the constructs of Asian

women through Orientalist discourse have created unquestioned knowledge, which has been deeply embedded in the psyche of western people, how do we explain the existence of women mobilizing in India and Britain? Can the Orientalist construct be challenged? Although usually regarded as invisible in public spaces, Asian women's presence has been recorded, evident in the form of industrial disputes, demonstrations against discriminatory immigration legislation and through the politicized setting up of Asian women's projects (Wilson, 1978). In other words they have demonstrated 'agency' in the sense defined at the beginning of the chapter.

However, the implications of religious agency cannot be overlooked and religion itself has played and continues to play a significant role both in contemporary Indian and British societies. The question of agency is laden with further problems and one that will be taken up in Part Two of this chapter. After this, Part Three examines the complexities of drawing on religion and revolutionary tactics to exercise agency.

## **Part Two**

### **Women as Active Agents: Indian Nationalism and Feminism**

So far the discussion has centred on the construction of the Indian woman and the part colonial discourse played in contemporary constructions. Asian women have been depicted as being unable to resist the power exerted either by colonial forces or by patriarchal relations. Caught in such a complex web of relations, it appears that due to tradition, culture and religion, South Asian women would operate or assert agency in a very limited way. However, increasingly, women have and still do, become involved in activities that require the assertion of political agency.

This part of the chapter will firstly, demonstrate the ways in which the concepts of agency and subjectivity connect over space and time, highlighted through the history of South Asian women's involvement in different arenas of struggle, both as colonial and post-colonial subjects. It is also equally important to highlight women's ability to resist and organize against oppressive rule. It is with this in mind that this chapter examines Asian women's assertion of agency on the Indian sub-continent firstly in the nationalist movement and secondly in the feminist movement. It will show how a historical contextualization can help in understanding the politicized role of Asian women in Britain.

### **Women's Role in Indian Nationalism**

The challenge to the passivity of Asian women is most evident when we consider that despite their negative portrayal, Indian women have a history of struggle and protest. Colonial ideology has presented Indian people as exploited, unable to act in the face of dharma and karma, which has served to reinforce the view of passivity and non-violence (Trivedi, 1984). Historical evidence of agency is highlighted in the role played by women in the Indian nationalist movements, albeit within the constructs and institutional contexts made available, particularly for middle class women, and in the Indian feminist movement. The nationalist project demanded the involvement of women in public activities, thereby creating a dilemma for Indian men, i.e. how to present a modern image through demonstrating the ability of self-rule *and* how to control women's behaviour (Thapar, 1993; Kumar, 1989; Trivedi, 1984). The constructs created by the nationalist movement which were made available to Indian women in the late nineteenth century were either the 'new woman' or the 'common woman', in other words the middle class and educated woman or the



street woman (Thapar, 1993). These two constructs provided the polar points within which Indian women had to construct their political agency and 'new' selves.

Despite their involvement in the nationalist movement led by Gandhi in the 1930s, political activism did not necessarily guarantee a positive image of Indian womanhood. As Trivedi points out, Indian women from all classes were involved in this movement, casting themselves as politically active, women with agency, involved in acts of resistance. Through this process, Indian women entered public spaces and were no longer confined to the private sphere. The participation of women meant that the 'new woman' would have to come out onto the streets with the 'common woman' (the real subaltern?). The paradox resulted in the modification of the constructs that enabled Indian women to be involved in leadership roles in the absence of men, due to arrest or detention by the authorities. However, in order for the women, as identified by these dichotomous constructs, to demonstrate together in public spaces, the 'common woman' would have to become respectable. These oppositional constructs illuminate differences in class and caste. The constructs highlight the strict parameters in which Indian women participated in the nationalist movement.

Regardless of the activity of women in public spaces, the underlying power in gender relations remained. This can also interestingly be observed in the ideas of Gandhi which were contradictory to women as active agents, in so much as promoting a reactionary and elitist view of Indian womanhood, i.e. one of silence, suffering, endurance and humility. Gandhi supported women's involvement by advocating an image of the Indian woman as internally pure, of

resisting, which is embodied in the ideology of the 'ideal wife', through the goddess Sita.

This image was successfully used by the women themselves in confrontations with the British police who were reluctant to 'offend the sacredness of Indian womanhood' (Thapar, 1998). Despite this reluctance the women were arrested and put into jails where they had to endure indignities and very difficult conditions<sup>11</sup>. Previously, women had been controlled within the private sphere. Thapar states:

The imprisoned women were isolated from the rest of society, and the jail now represented their 'home', although the dynamics were different from that of the domestic sphere. (Thapar, 1998:599).

The jail whilst creating a collective feeling amongst the women, is also a hidden space, where the women political prisoners, whether they were high caste or middle class, were humiliated, degraded and tortured. This is despite the fact that there was a rhetorical concern and respect for Indian womanhood. The treatment of prisoners, male and female and the treatment of people demonstrating against the British clearly contradicts the claim by the latter that they were injecting a civilizing element against the barbarity of Indian customs. In this instance it was the barbarity of the British that was evident in their efforts to control the population and the increasing anti-British feeling.

Despite the perpetual barbarity of Indian men's treatment of Indian women, feminine qualities were projected onto Indian men by the British to emphasize their own masculinity and the associated positive qualities of progress,

achievement and productivity. The portrayal of 'Indian men, in general, and upper-caste Hindu men in particular [as] effete' (Alter, 1994:54-55) was appropriated by Gandhi, in his leadership of the nationalist movement. Gandhi's use of 'feminine' qualities to engage in non-violent resistance through passive endurance and self-sacrifice can be considered a sophisticated strategic decision as independence could not be gained through 'masculine' violence against the British (Nandy, 1980). Non-violent methods were regarded as liberating by Gandhi however the idea of 'feminine resistance' produced an obstacle for the assertion of agency by Indian women. On the one hand Gandhi created a role for women in the nationalist movement, on the other hand he appeased men through embracing patriarchal power by restricting women to the home (S. Patel, 1988).

Ideas relating to masculinity and femininity in the nationalist movement are again described at length by Suruchi Thapar in *'Women as Activists, Women as Symbols: A Study of the Indian Nationalist Movement'* (1993). As mentioned above, the involvement of women in the nationalist movement created a dilemma for men. To facilitate the involvement of middle class women in public spaces femininity and motherhood based on goddesses such as Sita, were posed in such a way as to enhance the masculinity of Indian men, therefore projecting an image to the west of the capability of Indian men for self rule, and their valorization of the virtues of motherhood. Gandhi's philosophy encouraged the participation of women, yet appeased Indian men by not appearing to disturb the sanctity of the home and the central role played by women within this sphere. It is therefore this role which is emphasized in his identification of spinning and weaving as activities of resistance, posing no threat to Indian

masculinity. Another association with motherhood is also made by referring to India as 'Mother India', cleverly drawn into the nationalist project through protection of the mother's honour. Thus women were to be revered, to be protected, their honour to be saved. The 'new woman' which apparently allowed middle class women to participate in political activities, assumed a homogeneous category. However, due to differences of age and religion, the younger women became involved in revolutionary activities, a move away from non-violence, utilizing religious imagery. Thapar comments:

Women involved in sabotage stressed the destructive, aggressive and violent qualities of the feminine deities (Shakti and Kali).

(Thapar, 1993:91)

Religion also acted as a divide amongst the middle class women in that more Hindu women were involved in the nationalist movement in comparison to Muslim women, despite both religions observing *purdah*. The involvement of middle class Muslim women, offended Muslim men, notwithstanding women's retention of the *burqa* during public activities (Thapar, 1993). This brief sketch of the parameters of women's involvement in the nationalist struggle illustrates a much more complex picture of their capacity for agency than that depicted in colonial discourse.

Regardless of the involvement of women in political activities in the past on the Indian subcontinent, it is the image of the subordinated woman, oppressed by patriarchy that is reproduced in many western feminist discourses, reinforcing the view of passivity and submission amongst Asian woman. However we can turn to the existence of a feminist movement in India to repudiate this notion.



## Indian Feminism

This section looks at the position of Indian women within recent western feminist discourse concerning the well being of women, for example concern over police rape, dowry murders and unionization. It will also look at its relationship to religious doctrine, specifically with reference to recent cases of *sati*. Through this it will investigate the different interpretation of the exercise of agency, between mainstream western and third world feminism. As a starting point for the comparison of these interpretations a parallel can be drawn between the development of Indian feminism and western feminism. The feminist movement developed in India and western Europe at key moments firstly, in the early twentieth century then as a second wave feminist movement in the 1970s (Kumar, 1989).

Kumar (1989) illustrates both a comparable degree and a similarity of form of expression of agency in the face of stereotypical beliefs held about women in both the west and India. The history of involvement in struggles have usually been overlooked in the assessment of Asian women living in contemporary Britain except in accounts by Asian women themselves (Wilson, 1978). Instead the Asian woman is presented as a victim of archaic religious practices, one who requires to be saved from the oppressive Asian male (Mani, 1989).

Regarding the similarities between the movements in the west and in India, we need to turn to the activities of women during the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, the radical movements that women were involved in were based on diverse political affiliations, from Gandhian-Socialism to Maoism. It was not until 1975<sup>12</sup> that women's groups emerged in the major cities (Kumar, 1993). Most of the women involved were drawn from the middle classes and their concern was

not for themselves, as they saw women belonging to other groups having greater needs. The concern focussed on tribal women, subordinate caste women and women workers. The main task of these middle class women was then to raise awareness through consciousness raising, similar to the concerns of women in the British feminist movement. Campaigns were initiated around dowry deaths, rape, slum dwellers, unionization and domestic service (Kumar, 1993). The publicizing of these issues meant that the family (the private sphere), as an oppressive site for women, was under scrutiny.

Kumar (1993, 1989) notes the plethora of political activity in women's organizations set up in India. The activity also extended to the uneasy campaigning alongside right wing Hindu organizations which sometimes resulted in the hijacking of women's issues by political parties. However, what is clear is the mobilization of women in campaigns in rural as well as urban areas. It is this mobilization and experience that has often been overlooked by feminists in the west, resulting in the stereotyping and pathologizing of different groups of women.

The change from demonstration activities to the establishment of women's centres in India were vital to putting into practice the idea of sisterhood which cut across class, caste and culture. However, the feminist movement fragmented through a questioning of the commonality of experiences of women (tribal, subordinate caste, women workers). The idea of 'difference' emerged in the Indian feminist movement based on political affiliation, initiating a divide between organizations emphasizing collective identity and others moving towards individualism. This is also evident in the development of British

feminism (Brah, 1996). Thus, similarities can be found between the feminist movement in India and the issues dealt with by black feminists in the West. This is particularly evident with reference to the concepts of identity and agency. According to Kumar (1993), the development of sophisticated critiques against feminism have been reminiscent of those put forward against social reformers of the nineteenth century, i.e. traditions of Hindu society not being respected by modern, western thinking upper class women who have drawn their arguments from capitalism. This echoes the tradition versus modernity arguments used to account for the act of *sati*. Although women's issues have been given recognition in India in so much as political parties have 'women's fronts', a counter movement against feminism has taken the form of communalism. Despite the attack on feminism, feminists have been successful in passing legislation against *sati*.

### ***Sati* as a Feminist Issue**

Religion plays an important part in the critique against feminism and feminist activities concerned with issues such as *sati*. The aim of this section is to draw together religion, feminism and *sati* to illustrate different interpretations of women's agency and their ability to resist oppressive practices.

If firstly we take into account legislation that forbids *sati*, it can be seen that paradoxically it can criminalize the 'victims' (the women). Legislation, thereby, is able to punish in the form of jail sentences and fines. If the understanding of agency is in the terms of free will (which also implies a choice), then it is the will of the widow which is central to the argument. As mentioned earlier, in this conceptualization of agency the widow's will revolves around coercion and

consent, a binary understanding emphasizing either the voluntary nature of *sati* or coercion leading to a murderous act. Carried to the extreme in colonial India, the widow's *sati* was allowed if it could be ascertained through a cross-examination (at the funeral pyre) that the action was voluntary. A binary understanding such as this therefore stifles any attempts to consider agency as dynamic rather than static or women as active agents rather than passive victims to be acted upon. The conceptualization of agency returns the discussion to the view that Asian women are regarded as passive victims. The role of victim if we move to the western sphere is assigned to the Third World woman by certain forms of feminist understanding. The role of victim is not without pitfalls either for feminists in India when considering agency. The problem as Mani points out relates to feminism:

Questions of agency provoke issues at the heart of feminism. But in raising them in the current Indian context, one walks a tightrope. Firstly, given the dominant discourses on *sati*, to claim that women are agents even in their coercion is to court the possibility of misappropriation by the right wing. Secondly, current legislation on *sati*, by making women attempting *sati* liable to punishment implicitly conceives of them as 'free agents'. In the short term, then, it seems safest to counter the notion of woman as free agent by emphasizing her victimization.

(Mani, 1992:320-321)

Thus within Indian feminist analysis, it appears to be more appropriate to emphasize woman as victim rather than as free agent, alongside a more complex understanding of agency. This avoids setting up women to be saved from merciless acts, i.e. *sati*, from which the colonialist tried to save women. Also agency is further problematic because depending on where and how it is invoked, it holds different meanings: for example, British feminists' and Indian feminists' understandings differ due to their location.



To illustrate this, Lata Mani describes four different positions taken up in the context of *sati* and in particular Roop Kanwar's 'decision' to commit this act in 1987. The first is the liberal position that condemns *sati* as being brutal, barbaric and backward. This is similar to the horror felt by the colonialists in India at such an act. A problem associated with the liberal attitude is concerned with their lack of horror or outrage in the face of *other* oppressive acts against women, of which there are many in India. The critiques offered by the liberals and feminists are, more often than not, overlooked by critics who are against the 'modernists'.

Secondly, the conservative pro *sati* lobby argues for it on the basis of religion and tradition. They also criticize the rationality argument put forward by the urban westernized Indians and their inability to understand Indian culture. Thirdly, there is the anti-modernist stance which forms a 'tradition'/'modernity' dichotomy. The critique of the modernist stand attempts to invoke *sati* as a religious act through which the burning of the widow in an *authentic sati* of the past obtains magical and sacred powers (Nandy 1980).

The fourth position is that of the feminists who proposed that it is against the preservation of life. The feminist analysis has focused primarily around the subordination of women in general and regarding *sati* as a 'modern' act, in order to move it away from the religion/tradition understanding. The modernity referred to was in the case of the village that Roop Kanwar came from: it was considered to be a prosperous town where the men involved in the pro-*sati* lobby were all educated, yet they were willing to use religion to justify this act.

However, from the standpoint of Indian feminist discourse, the use of religion does not absolve them of the crime of murder which is how they define *sati*.

The next part of the chapter therefore looks at the increasingly popular role of religion and the implications it holds for women exercising agency. In particular it examines the:

- role of religion in the construction and/or adoption of an identity with a predefinition for activism
- tensions between religious and feminist discourses for the crafting of political agency
- issues about the objectives of political agency

### **Part Three**

#### **Women as Active Agents: Religious Identity and Agency**

The contemporary revival of religion within the Hindutva movement in India illustrates that political agency does not necessarily have to limit itself to left wing 'freedom' movements. The Hindutva movement demonstrates the power of religion, religious symbols and iconography<sup>13</sup> to mobilize women in public places. This part of the chapter will therefore show how women have become involved in this right wing movement. Another aspect to consider in the increasingly important role of religion, is the implication that it may hold for theorizing women's agency and the feminist response.

The backdrop to the Hindutva movement is the rise in communalism in India, the reverberations of which have been felt in Britain with a resultant upsurge in ethnic identity based on religion. The upsurge in ethnic identity based on

religion is manifested in many ways and is an important component in the formation of identity. Within the South Asian diaspora, religious identity or cultural identification with being Hindu, Muslim or Sikh is politicized at the international level with the reverberations of events occurring on the Indian subcontinent being felt in Britain. Examples include the Hindu<sup>14</sup> movement Hindutva in India (Butalia, 1995; Sarkar and Butalia, 1995) the Sikh<sup>15</sup> movement for an independent state (Puar, 1996) and Islamism, the placing of Islam<sup>16</sup> politically at the centre of one's identity (Sayyid, 1997:17).

The difficulty is how to untangle empowerment from the religious issues, because identities based on religion manage to draw together feelings of nationalism, pride, and cultural preservation both in Britain and the Indian subcontinent. It is a cause of concern and anxiety, particularly to the Left and feminists. The impact of the increasing popularity of religious identities is significant for women organizing against oppression and the re-assertion of patriarchy which has led to the policing of women's sexuality (Sudbury, 1998; V. Patel, 1994). Pragna Patel (1997) commenting on religious revivalism and the consequences for women's rights states:

Women's bodies and minds are the battleground for the preservation of the 'purity' of religious and communal identities. So the role of women as signifiers and transmitters of identity within the family becomes crucial.

(P. Patel, 1997:26)

The Hindutva movement in India promotes a Hindu identity which is anti-Muslim and anti-Christian (the 'Others'). The killing of Muslims has been frequent since the late 1980s and the aim of destroying anything related to the Islamic faith culminated in the demolition of a sixteenth century mosque, to be replaced by a

Hindu temple. Mazumdar (1995) cites the disturbing accounts of the involvement of women in the hatred expressed towards Muslims, in their support for the public rapes of women in Surat. The body of the female, whether Hindu, Sikh or Muslim, carries with it the honour of the family. It is this honour which was violated at the time of partition by the Muslims when women were forcibly removed from their homes to live in Pakistan. In the context of fundamentalism, it is the ability of Hindutva to construct the Muslim woman as the Other, therefore literally stripping her of any dignity and thereby legitimizing rape as an acceptable weapon in the 'holy' war (Agarwal, 1995).

The Muslim in British society has been cast as the racialized 'Other' particularly in the context of political developments and reactions begun in the wake of the Rushdie Affair, the 1991 Gulf War, the events on and after 9/11 2001 and the 'war on terrorism', and more recently the Iraq War of 2003. However, Muslim women have reacted to certain events such as rape, genocide and torture in the 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia. Muslim women organized public protests, after discussions with Muslim men who would prefer to have control over the public space. Thus the 'Women in Black March' included South Asian women's organizations, ranging from secular to religious (Werbner, 2002). Muslim women's organizations are based on the belief in Islam as an egalitarian religion, i.e. women's rights are guaranteed. Therefore it is understandable that women wishing to protest, use religion as a powerful force and for establishing themselves on the 'high ground' (Scott, 1985). The calling on religion is in contrast to women's organizations such as the Women's Action Forum in Pakistan during the Zia<sup>17</sup> era (1977-1998), who protested against the Islamicization process initiated by the military regime (Shaheed, 1998; Mumtaz



and Shaheed, 1987). The call for an equal voice in the diasporic public sphere by South Asian women is taken up in Chapters Five, Six and Seven where I will consider the impact of secular and religious organizations on women's and community issues. It is important to remember that because the public sphere is regarded as male dominated, the women who became involved in public demonstrations as described above, not only call on religion but also discourses of gender equality and human rights. Thus they were able to take the high ground as described by James Scott:

So long as men and women continue to justify their conduct by reference to values, the struggle for the symbolic high ground between groups and classes will remain an integral part of any conflict over power.

(J. Scott 1985: 235)

Moreover, it is the variations in wider political, social and institutional contexts that helps to explain the variations in the positions women inhabit in moral, religious and political discourses as they create spaces for agentic action. South Asian women, finding themselves marginalized have been involved in 'constant processes of struggle and negotiation' (Yuval-Davis, 1997:193) against discourses which define them as passive and lacking in agency. However, religion can also be used by women involved in right wing activities exemplified by the Hindutva movement in India. The involvement of women in right wing politics indicates an act of resistance to social change and other religions such as Islam. They are involved in upholding religious values, even though ultimately the redefinition of societies such as India, from a secular to a Hindu state, could have dire consequences for the position of women in Indian society. Although Hindutva ideology promotes women's education and

employment, such liberation is justified in the name of the family and reinforces women's role as mothers, wives and daughters. The Hindutva ideology promises equality, to restore the women to their glorious position of the past. Kum Kum Roy (1995) states that the Hindutva ideology that positions women within the home must be contested.

Accompanying this is the policing of women's sexuality in India. A similar development through religious revivalism is also evident in Britain (Sudbury, 1998). Parallel to the upsurge in communal politics in India, is politicized Islam (Islamism) in Britain. Although the forerunners of this religious revivalism are predominantly men, women have also taken up religion in their fight for equality as described above. Although it could be argued that a Muslim identity privileges the private sphere, i.e. the family, Muslim women in India have similarly put forward the idea of equal citizenship and women's rights, against personal law. This begs the question: are Muslim women in Britain involved in religious based organizations subverting religion for women's rights despite the fact that their rights are guaranteed through the notion of citizenship in a liberal democracy? In addressing this, I wish to emphasize the complexities involved in using religion as a political identity especially within the diasporic space that connects over time and space. The question of Islam as a mobilizing factor for women is taken up in Chapter Seven.

The question with reference to the right wing activity of women, as displayed in the Hindutva movement, is what role does gender as embodied subject and as a symbol play in casting the terms of political struggle? Moreover, why has Hindutva received such enthusiastic national support in comparison to that of

the feminist movement? The answer here lies in the roles assigned to women as they are considered to be central to keeping the faith. The women use goddesses to justify their role and, although this is not a new phenomenon, there is a distinction to be made in terms of which goddesses are used. To illustrate the distinction, Gandhi and the Hindutva movements used the goddesses Sita and Durga respectively. Gandhi used Sita in the nationalist movement to invoke the dutiful wife, feminine qualities such as non-violence, suffering and humility. In comparison, the women of the Hindutva movement use the icon Durga. This representation of Indian women rejects passivity for strength and war, ready to engage in battle with the Muslims. Feminine qualities are also rejected by the Hindu males who replace their image of tolerance towards Islam for a more 'revolutionary' stand against past acts of barbarity against them and the women of India (Butalia, 1995). Although women use goddesses to position themselves in the new Hindu nationalism, there is also a strong definition of the home and family life for women. Steve Derne comments:

Today, India's religious nationalism continues to construct woman as "symbols of culture and tradition" (Chhachhi 1989:575). Religious fundamentalist calls to return to Indian culture and tradition are addressed to women, rather than men. Fundamentalists urge women to reject modern garb in favor of traditional *saris* and *salwar kamizes* but do not demand that men stop wearing suits and ties (Chhachhi 1989:575). Thus, shifting the site of national identity to the family links national identity to women's subordination in their homes. As van de Veer argues, the honor of the nation has come to depend on "modesty, and submissiveness of the female body" (1994:85). (emphasis in original text)

(Derne, 2000:245)

A question must arise therefore that once the 'battle' has been won, will the women of weapons be able to occupy public roles or will they be returned to the

home and family? Ratna Kapur and Brenda Crossman, writing in the *Women Against Fundamentalism Journal* (1994) think not. In their article, 'Women and Hindutva', they express their concerns for women of all faiths, who the fundamentalists would like to see return to their traditional place, that of the home. In the context of equality they also go on to state that, 'despite the rhetoric of equality, women have much to lose in Hindutva' (Kapur and Crossman, 1994:45). Could the same be said of women using Islam for equality?

Although there has been resistance to the Hindutva movement in India, it is powerful since politically, it commands the support of the State, military and the intelligence services. Efforts at resistance against such a movement has come from women's rights activists, feminists, civil rights groups, and artists, but have failed to counter the powerful machinery of the Hindutva movement. The movement has also commanded support from Hindus living in Britain and the United States, who alienated from the white community, take pride in an emerging strong national and cultural movement. They have also contributed financially to the building of a Hindu temple on the site where the sixteenth century mosque, the Babari Masjid had been destroyed in 1992 (Mazumdar, 1995).

In a similar vein, the link between multiculturalism and religious fundamentalism has presented itself in Britain, particularly in connection with the State's understanding of Asian women's issues. It is thought that these are issues of concern for Asian communities and often community leaders, usually male have



mediated between 'the community' and the State. However, as Pragna Patel comments in 'Third Wave Feminism and Black Women's Activism':

There is a growing phenomenon of organized gangs and networks of Asian men who hunt down runaway Asian girls and women who are perceived to have transgressed the mores of their culture and religion, and to have defiled their honour and dignity. The family has therefore become a site of struggle for feminists and fundamentalists alike.

(P. Patel, 1997:264)

Thus the role of feminists has been made difficult by the so-called religious leaders, in their quest to control women. In their attempts to provide support for anti-communalist organizations in India, activists in Britain found the same hatred reserved for Muslims in India being directed towards them by women who form part of the widespread support for the Hindutva movement. The female activists against fundamentalism were labelled as 'Muslim-loving prostitutes' (P. Patel, 1997:266). Women's rights play a pivotal role in the fight against religious fundamentalism, racism and sexism, and point the direction for feminist politics towards coalitions cutting across class, caste, religion, race and gender. This is an important point to bear in mind with reference to political agency and activism of Asian women in Britain.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the complex characteristics of agency and identity construction of South Asian women. It has shown the centrality of networks of history and discourses in the construction of the female post-colonial subject, to challenge the expected low levels of organization amongst South Asian women and to show that a form of political agency exists. Evidence suggests that the colonial image of South Asian women has been transported (over time) to the

post-colonial British context and reconfigured as a racialized discourse (Rattansi, 1994; Brah, 1992; Parmar, 1982). South Asian women have been depicted as being unable to resist the power exerted either by colonial forces or patriarchal relations. It has therefore been necessary to show how colonial discourses such as orientalism have been used to present Asian women negatively within a binary understanding.

The victim status attributed to South Asian women has been shown to be a construct through presenting them as significant actors both, during the colonial period within the nationalist movement, and through feminist activism. An exploration of South Asian women's experiences as colonial and postcolonial subjects illustrates well the complexities involved in redefining the political arena through constructs such as the 'new woman' and the 'common woman' (Thapar, 1993; Kumar, 1989; Trivedi, 1984). Further to this the issue of *sati* has demonstrated the need for a deeper and more complex understanding of agency, free will and victim status. Although parallels can be drawn between western and Indian feminism, the uses of terminologies need to be applied contextually. Thus western feminists' use of orientalism in describing, for example *sati* (Daly, 1978) has been criticized by black feminists (Mohanty, 1991a) due to its involvement in the Othering process, through speaking for third world women.

The final part of the chapter has also highlighted the difficulties in analyzing the agency of women particularly in the context of religion. It has shown how women are central to issues of national and religious identities. Communalism in India and racialization in Britain indicates the creation of the 'Other', i.e. the

Muslim. Racialization also needs to be located historically, as a contradictory phenomenon, which has a structural relationship to British society and the colonized societies. This is specifically important in terms of belonging and nationalist sentiments that are prominent in times of structural crisis. The situation is complex in terms of how religious identities are used in different circumstances. Religion can be used to 'liberate' or 'oppress' and the understandings of these terms are multi-layered and often contradictory.

What this complex, uneven and contradictory matrix of discourses, institutional spheres and terrains has pointed to is a need for a more nuanced conceptualization of agency. Thus I have suggested that we conceive agency as a dynamic space of manoeuvre within and between discourses, places, spaces, and institutional and cultural norms and practices. What a historical contextualization of South Asian women's experiences enables us to do is to understand their position, with all the complexities involved, along the axes of caste, class and religion, in contemporary society. Such a reading is particularly significant with reference to race, culture and multicultural understandings, facilitating a departure from a binary or stereotypical understanding of passivity and complacency. Historicizing and locating political agency through a theorization of experience is necessary to challenge the universality of gendered oppressions (Mohanty, 1992). Mohanty's notion of political agency includes political location as well as a contradictory understanding of the self that relates to the notion of multiple, contradictory and essentialized identities. This will be discussed in Chapters Five, Six and Seven based on the primary data collected for this study. The location in Mohanty's terms is not fixed and that '[...] a temporality of struggle [...] suggests an insistent, simultaneous, non-



synchronous process characterized by multiple locations [...] [and] movement between cultures, languages and complex configurations of meaning and power' (Mohanty, 1992:87-89). Thus the past and the present meet in history, location and culture. The next chapter looks at the methods used to collect empirical evidence from the participants in the research.

## NOTES

1. 'Race' appears to have played a central role in the study of Orientalism (Inden, 1986). Ronald Inden emphasizes the use of 'race' by referring to Hegel's distinction between 'Hither Asia' and 'Farther Asia' based on racial characteristics. 'Hither Asia, for Hegel consisted of people from 'European stock' whereas in 'farther Asia', the people were thought to be of the 'Asiatic' or 'Mongolian' race. It is on the basis of this that Ronald Inden (1986) distinguishes between different conceptions of the Orient. The older conception identified a Christian Europe and an Islamic Asia, based on religion, which interestingly included some countries of Europe and those outside of the Ottoman Empire. The more 'recent' (19<sup>th</sup> Century) definition, based on racial characteristics, split the Orient into the Near East (extending to Aryan Persia) and the Far East (India, China, Japan, South East Asia).

2. They comment on the Othering process carried out by the Orientalists and illustrate the connections of power and knowledge. In the context of colonialism, it is historical specificity that features in their account. But what stands out in Mani and Frankenberg's review of reviews, regarding Said's *Orientalism*, is the emphasis on the separation of knowledge, power, and historical specificity by the reviewers to invalidate Said's argument. It is the interconnection between these three factors that Mani and Frakenberg regard as the central argument in the text.

3. Multiculturalism is taken up in Chapter Six

4. *Purdah* refers to female seclusion, privacy or veiling.

5. However, Lawrence's text cannot be necessarily regarded as something that is counter-hegemonic. It has also been effectively used to illustrate disruption and contradictory ideas of subjectivity and identity at the point where the 'self' collides with the Other. The 'self' being referred to is that of the white man, Lawrence.

6. Jonathon Rutherford (1990) in 'A Place Called Home' exemplifies this. Rutherford acknowledges that although he is writing from the centre, he sees himself as holding marginal political views. Thus through a process of decentring and the movement from essentialized identities, for him, the margin becomes the site of political resistance.

7. Lata Mani in 'Contentious Traditions: *The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*' states: 'The abolition of sati (widow immolation) by the British in 1829 has become a founding moment in the history of women in modern India. [...] even the most anti-imperialist amongst us has felt to forced to acknowledge the 'positive' consequences of colonial rule for certain aspects of women's lives, if not in terms of actual practice, at least at the level of ideas about 'women's rights' (Mani, 1989:89).

8. If the idea of the subaltern is placed within the context of *sati*, for the colonialist, it is the Indian woman who requires rescuing from this terrible fate. Spivak refers to this crusade as part of chivalry and expresses it as, 'White men saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak, 1988). This is an imperialist understanding. The act of chivalry is taken up by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in which she uses novels such as *Around the World in Eighty Days* and *The Far Pavilions* to show the preoccupation with *sati* which depicted India as barbaric, thereby exerting the superiority of the British. It is set up against the Indian 'nativist' argument that the women freely 'choose' to immolate themselves.



9. Although the British abolished *sati* in 1829, it continued as a practice. The practice has continued in the late twentieth century.
10. For Ramabai's experiences in England see Burton (1995).
11. The imprisonment of middle class women in jails originally 'designed' for men and 'lower' classes, with male prison wardens became a cause of concern to the Viceroy and MPs in Britain. Suruchi Thapar (1998) provides an excellent account of the experiences of female Indian prisoners during the nationalist movement, their separation from the 'ordinary female convicts', such as prostitutes (subaltern) who were made to clean their cells due to their political prisoner status. She also draws on the experiences of political prisoners in Britain, the Suffragettes, Nawal el Sadawi in Egypt, Ruth First, a journalist in South Africa. But in the case of India, the political prisoners were mostly middle class, classed either as 'A' or 'B' class prisoners.
12. Second wave feminism in Britain was inaugurated only six years earlier at Oxford.
13. This is not to say that the use of religious iconography is limited to this movement, in fact the younger revolutionary women of the nationalist movement used the goddesses Kali and Shakti. The difference is that religious iconography was used to exemplify the strength and power of woman. Hindutva demonstrates the intimate connection between the State and religion in India. Hindu fundamentalist parties consist of the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP), the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). There are other militant organizations such as the Shiv Sena. It has mobilized Indian women through a symbolic usage of the goddess Durga who is the consort of Shiva, one of the most important Hindu female deities.
14. Hinduism is a mixture of cults, doctrines, and sects that have had a profound effect on Indian culture. It relies on the authority of religious literature – the Vedas, the Epics, and the Puranas. Attempts were made to create some order of the myths and legends surrounding the deities (Krishna and Lakshmi) resulting in the Puranas (4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D). See Singh, D.V. (1991) *Hinduism: An Introduction*, Jaipur and New Delhi: Travel Wheels and Pearl Graphics.
15. The founder of Sikhism is Guru Nanak, born a Hindu (1469-1539). Sikhism is a new faith which transcends Hinduism and it has ten gurus and a holy book the *Adi Granth*. Symbols of baptism are the 'Five Ks' for uncut hair, comb, sword, steel bangle, breeches. In addition men wear the turban although orthodox Sikh women wear the turban as well. See The Minority Rights Group Report No.65, (1986) *The Sikhs*, London: Pergamon Press and MRG.
16. Islam was founded by the Prophet Mohammed in 610 A.D. The holy book is The Koran and Islam has no deities. There are two branches of Islam – the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. See Ahmed, A. (1988) *Discovering Islam: making sense of muslim history and society*, London and New York: Routledge.
17. The Zia era is from 1977 to 1988 when he insisted that Pakistan should be an Islamic state ruled by Islamic principles. Zia's policy was of Islamic nationalism. The Islamic principles appeared in Pakistan's foreign policy.

## **Chapter 4    Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to provide an account of the research process and the methods employed for the collection of the data. I will situate the research within the debates around methodological issues, including political and ethical implications. In particular I will make reference to feminist methodology and its influence on the research process in this study of South Asian women's political agency. The research provides challenging questions for the methodological process, particularly in terms of addressing what propels Asian women into forms of political activism.

The chapter consists of three parts: Part One addresses the question 'what counts as feminist research?'. I have chosen to engage with this question because the study is based on semi-structured interviews and I wanted to examine why interviewing has come to be coded as feminine and subjective, as opposed to masculine and objective. In this context this section will explore how power is necessarily implicated in different interview situations. Part Two looks at how the research for this study was carried out. It provides an overview of how the participants for this research were located and includes issues around access, and the structure of the interviews. Part Three is dedicated to the process of reflexivity. I have tried to write this thesis from a position that allows reflection on the research process. By means of a research diary, I have been able to make observations about and locate myself in the research process. It has allowed me to examine the difficulties associated with access; power and knowledge production; and 'race' as an influential factor. The impact of 'race' is

also explored in connection with quality of data, knowledge production and 'authenticity', and rapport.

This chapter therefore charts my journey in collecting the women's narratives and in the development of a methodological analysis of South Asian women's experiences. What follows is an attempt to draw together and utilize some of the methodological issues from the key areas above.

### **Part One: Feminist Methodology and Doing Feminist Research**

Although there are many different conceptualizations of what constitutes feminist research, there are certain distinctive features that can be drawn on. I have based the study of South Asian women's political agency on my understanding of feminist methodology. One of the most important underlying features of feminist methodology is the approach used to overcome the issue of male bias in research and knowledge production (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Reinharz, 1992). I want to argue that although certain difficulties and tensions may exist within feminist epistemology, it has led to a questioning of, firstly, experience as the basis for feminist methodologies and, secondly, the binary of qualitative and quantitative research. Feminism is 'a powerful conceptual tool for critiquing traditional sociological research' (Millen, 1997:1). Feminist methodology has come to be seen as having important underlying tenets. *Firstly*, women's experiences are used to invoke an understanding of their lives (Stacey, 1988). *Secondly*, this understanding should promote a capacity for liberation and social change (Smith, 1988). *Thirdly*, reflexivity is promoted which serves to locate the researcher into the research process to confront and deal with issues of bias and interpretations of data (Oakley, 1988). Feminist research

has been described by Martyn Hammersley as:

The argument that there is a specifically feminist methodology implies not just that feminists select research topics on a different basis to non-feminists, but that when a feminist investigates a particular topic, the whole process of research will reflect her commitment to feminism.

(Hammersley, 1992; 191)

In using a feminist approach, I am aware that I run the risk of being placed in opposition to quantitative methodology. One of the major debates within feminist methodologies is between quantitative and qualitative methodologies resulting in a polarization of the two. Thus in addressing what constitutes feminist research, a distinction can be falsely made between positivist, objective (sometimes referred to as androcentric) quantitative research and feminist methods which use qualitative data. However, the use of a feminist methodology does not necessitate disregarding or considering quantitative methods as inappropriate to feminist research. Mary Maynard points to a second and related area of difficulty. Despite the fact that there may be agreement that feminist social research is carried out, the problem is in reconciling different strands of thought as to what constitutes feminist research. Thus she uses Sandra Harding's distinction between method, methodology and epistemology:

The question as to what constitutes feminist social research has been an issue for feminists for over a decade and there is now a considerable literature addressing the topic. It seems to be widely accepted by feminists themselves that there is a distinctively feminist mode of enquiry, although there is by no means agreement on what this might mean or involve [...] Whereas method refers to techniques for gathering research material, methodology provides both theory and analysis of the research process. Epistemology is concerned with providing a philosophical



grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate.

(Maynard, 1994:10)

Feminist research developed from the inefficacy of quantitative approaches of enquiry to account for the experiences of women. In its place qualitative data, collected usually in the form of interviews, participant observation, life history methods and focus groups, was understood to ensure the production of appropriate knowledge. Whether this counts as 'good' research has been a focus of debate, as Morgan notes:

Among these terms we may note 'reliability', 'validity', 'falsifiability', 'verifiability', 'internal consistency' and so on ...are the staple diet of methodology textbooks and refer to the criteria by which sociological practices may be evaluated, by which, indeed, pieces of work may be said to 'count' as sociology.

(Morgan, 1995:95)

Reliability, viability, and objectivity have long been regarded as the trademarks of a positivist approach to research involving quantitative forms of data. Although the critique of objective research by feminists has shown it to be reinforcing masculinist forms of knowledge, it would be simplistic to reject quantitative research outright. Research, for example, concerning the extent of violence against women or the participation in the labour market, has shown that statistical evidence has been crucial in the decision-making process and in implementing social policies (Bagilhole, 1994; Dobash et al., 1992; Mama, 1989; Dobash and Dobash, 1985). Indeed feminist research has been criticized for the collection of subjective experiences, of women interviewing other women, and for its concern around 'women's issues'. Although overall feminist

research has been effective in ensuring the visibility of women, it has undergone changes in the construction of knowledge (Oakley, 1995; Stanley and Wise, 1993; Smith, 1988; Harding, 1987; Bell and Roberts, 1984) Yet the reliance on 'experience' as the central tenet of feminist research often leads to the assumption that interviewing is an inherently feminist technique that provides in-depth knowledge of women's lives and the truth. This belief can end up essentializing women, including the subjects of this research, South Asian women.

The rejection of a positivist social science has also implied that a non-exploitative/hierarchical relationship exists between the researcher and the researched. This ideal has been put forward as emancipatory and 'number crunching' as having only 'directional orientation' for research on women. Feminist researchers therefore supplanted 'experiment' for 'experience'. The following statement by Reinharz, therefore captures the importance attached to experience and the voices of women:

Many feminists have written that "finding one's voice" is a crucial process of their research and writing. During this phase the researcher understands a phenomenon *and* finds a way of communicating that understanding [...] it [feminist research] takes us beyond "fighting patriarchy" and shows us what we can do. It illustrates how some people have struggled for "the right to be producers of knowledge without being trapped into the reproduction of patriarchal ways of knowing.

(Reinharz, 1992:16-17)

Ann Oakley puts forward a critique of the construction of qualitative and quantitative research as polar opposites. For her, it:

Impedes critical thinking about developing and using ways of knowing capable of respecting the autonomy and subjectivity of the researched, at the same time as minimising bias, in creating an appropriate knowledge for women [...] instead of looking forward to what an emancipatory (social) science could offer people's wellbeing, we lose ourselves in a socially constructed drama of gender, where the social relations of femininity and masculinity prescribe and proscribe, not only ways of knowing, but what it is that we do know.

(Oakley, 1998: 725)

Oakley argues that while the early projection of qualitative research as feminist and an epistemological separation between this and quantitative methods has helped to give voice to marginalized groups such as women, problems remain if there is a hard divide between qualitative and quantitative methods. Oakley asserts that the authenticity of female knowledge through their voices is called into question, as are the issues of power relations, bias, and validity within an interview situation. The challenge is to the assumption that interviews fulfil the requirements of feminist research. Commenting on the interview as a research tool that was initially used in survey methods within the 'masculine paradigm', Oakley points out:

[...] the entire paradigmatic representation of the 'proper' interview in the methodology textbooks, owes a great deal more to a masculine social and sociological vantage point than to a feminine one [...] the paradigm of the 'proper' interview appeals to such values as objectivity, detachment, hierarchy and 'science' as an important cultural activity which takes priority over people's more individualised concerns.

(Oakley, 1995:38)

Oakley uses the idea of a masculine perspective to make a distinction between 'proper' and 'improper' interviewing. This is not to suggest that feminist interviewing is therefore considered to be 'improper' but she is able to

demonstrate that 'methodology is itself gendered' (Oakley, 1998: 707). Oakley argues that, in the past, those who were interviewed were usually female with the male interviewer assuming a superior role (Oakley, 1998). Thus, for feminists during the 1960s, it made sense that the scientific male oriented study of social science should be sidelined in favour of subjective experience and equality in an interview relationship. Interviewing refers to semi-structured and unstructured interviews and their appeal lies in their capacity to provide the space for women to speak their own stories (experience) rather than having them told by men (Reinharz, 1992). The next section therefore examines the role of experience in feminist epistemology.

### **Experience and the Feminist Epistemological Position**

This section looks at the concept 'experience' and the ways in which it has been used in knowledge production. I look at the development of a feminist epistemological position and how a standpoint theory put forward by black feminists is inadequate to deal with the diversity and socio-historical specificity of experiences. The inadequacy of the standpoint theory also relates to the work covered in the two preceding chapters that locate South Asian women as active historical and contemporary agents. Historicization provides a contextualization for the use of feminist methods employed in this study. I will argue that experience is a useful analytical concept and should be retained but that there is also a need to avoid the over simplification of the concept as conceived and deployed by black feminist standpoint theory. Experience as a concept has long been thought of as one of the central tenets of feminism. It has been argued that women's economic and social positioning differs from that of men (Smith, 1988) and that for black women the role of 'race' cannot be



underestimated. Black feminist epistemology is based on 'black women's knowledge' and experience (Mirza, 1997; Collins, 1991). Collins advocates the use of black women's experiences to investigate contact points between black women's standpoint and accompanying epistemology and Afrocentric and feminist analyses:

Afrocentric thought offers two significant contributions toward furthering our understanding of the important connections among knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment [...] By embracing a paradigm of race, class and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, Black feminist thought reconceptualises the social relations of domination and resistance. Second Black feminist thought addresses ongoing epistemological debates in feminist theory and in the sociology of knowledge concerning ways of assessing 'truth'.

(Collins, 1991:222)

The importance of black women's experiences therefore is deemed to represent a central role in the construction of theory and knowledge (a black feminist epistemology) where references can be made to similar and shared experiences of colonialism and racism. The centrality of this role is contained in the critique of western feminism and feminist epistemology which marginalized the experiences of black women in the construction of knowledge.

The development of black feminist epistemology stems from the oppression of black women which has been marginalized under the grand narrative of western feminism's universalization of experience (Mirza, 1997; Carby, 1982). It has led to a challenge by black feminists who have stated that the homogenization of women's experiences have rendered black women invisible. Through the deconstruction of the term 'woman', the idea of diversity and difference have gained recognition (Aziz, 1992; Brah, 1992; Hill-Collins, 1991;

Riley, 1988). Although black feminist epistemology is grounded in the discursive positionings and experiences of black women, it also makes references to their location within a collective history (Mama, 1995; Amos and Parmar, 1984). Thus South Asian women have been represented through their collective experiences of colonialism and migration (Wilson, 1978).

The marginalization and exclusion of black women's experiences within feminist discourse has also led to the interrogation of 'whiteness' which is regarded as the norm to be measured against (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996). In her research on white women, Frankenberg describes it as a 'standpoint':

First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a "standpoint", a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others and at society. Third, "whiteness" refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and un-named. (Frankenberg, 1993:1)

It is this unmarking and un-naming which has been evident in western feminist thought. Black feminists have critiqued the eurocentric nature of western feminism because it has claimed to represent all women. In response to black feminist criticisms and an attempt to 'include' black women's experiences, western feminists employed the strategy of 'addition'. This too was criticized by black feminists who claimed that the 'addition' of black women to white feminist epistemology only serves to marginalize this group further (Harding, 1991; hooks, 1989). The further marginalization was thought to occur due to the failure to engage with the different experiences at the intersection of 'race' and structure. Western feminist epistemology has also received further criticism from 'third world' feminists who raised the question of political agency (Mohanty,

1992, 1991; Grewal et al., 1988; Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe, 1985). Mohanty comments on western feminist treatment of third world women:

It is in this process of discursive homogenization and systemization of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent Western feminist discourse, and this power needs to be defined and named.

(Mohanty, 1991:54)

Thus the significance of history, 'race' and culture cannot be overlooked with reference to black women's experiences. However if only black women can document 'accurately' the experiences of black women, it holds consequences not only in terms of making these experiences visible but also has implications for black feminist epistemology. Can only black women research other black women? Perhaps the central issue to grapple with is the idea of knowledge production, to compare knowledge produced by dominant and subordinate groups. The question here is, what counts as 'real' knowledge and what is its relationship to power, i.e. who has epistemic privilege (Harding, 1991; Haraway, 1988)? Despite challenges to the feminist universalization of gendered oppression, racialized power differentials still exist within feminist epistemologies and political practices. Those in power are able to define Others, impose identities, and render them powerless (Mohanty, 1988; Amos and Parmar, 1984;).

Epistemic privilege, Sandra Harding (1991) and Donna Haraway (1988) argue is located in the hands of the powerful (white, male and middle class) based on notions of objectivity and rationality. Whilst they agree that all knowledge is socially constructed, knowledge that has come to be regarded as 'objective' and

'rational' with its cultural and historical specificity, becomes accepted as the 'norm'. Feminist epistemology, as shown in the last section, has struggled against knowledge production through research that is regarded as androcentric. Although its status has usually been relegated to the idea of 'subjugated knowledge', for feminists it has provided a method for deconstructing dominant ideologies regarding the position of women. Similarly, black feminist epistemology has allowed black women to interrogate dominant racist ideologies which pathologize them as 'promiscuous' and 'licentious' (Brah, 1987) or 'passive' and 'complacent' (Wilson, 1978). Research has also shown that the experiences of South Asian women are not homogeneous (Sudbury, 1998; Bhopal, 1997; Bhachu, 1988; Westwood and Bhachu, 1988). Thus black feminist epistemology is empowering through the process of self definition and affirmation which effectively means the rejection of disempowering discourses, the setting up of alternative forms of engagement and political activism to instigate social change (Collins, 1991).

If feminist methodology uses the term 'experience', can it be regarded as a powerful analytical tool? Joan Scott (1992) has argued that in order to make visible different standpoints that seek to challenge dominant ideological systems, historians have used experience. It is usually presented in the form of uncontested evidence. Indeed standpoint is not a feminist invention, as it has been used in the past by, for example, Karl Marx to portray a working class standpoint which challenges the dominant ideology of the bourgeoisie (Hartsock, 1997). Similarly, E. P. Thompson situates individual subjectivity within a collective identity of the working class. Amina Mama's (1995) research on black women also locates individual subjectivity within a collective history.



But is it enough to accept 'experience' as a foundation for a theoretical perspective? Can we accept it as an 'authentic truth' simply because one's subjectivity is constructed through experience? Scott challenges the idea of experience as an analytical tool in its simplest form and argues that the issue is 'the discursive character of experience [...] because attributing experience to discourse seems somehow to deny its status as an unquestionable ground of explanation' (J.W.Scott, 1992:31).

J.W.Scott's proposal is not to abandon experience as a concept but to examine it in a new light. This would involve uncovering *why* people have the experiences that they do, i.e. how subjectivities and identities are produced. Thus, when the researcher interrogates experience, it allows for a more informed knowledge rather than assuming individuals as the source of that knowledge. It moves away from essentializing identities, from hierarchies of oppression, regarding experience as authentic, and marginalization to regarding women as having agency and a diversity of experiences within specific historical and geographical locations (Hall, 1990). This is an important point in the context of South Asian women's political agency. Therefore, a wider understanding of experience is necessary which would prevent some women (black women in the west) speaking on behalf of all (Third World) women (Mohanty, 1992; Trinh, 1989) and to move away from the discourse of victim to one of active agent. Indeed black feminists have recognized the ways in which there has been an over simplification in the analysis of experience. Gail Lewis has asserted that any analysis of experience needs to be 'widened, deepened and embedded'. Lewis argues for attention to the ways in which experience is created through 'webs of social, political and cultural relations which are

themselves organised on the axes of power and which act to constitute subjectivities and identities' (G.Lewis, 2000:173). In addition to this the socio-historical specificity of the concept 'experience' needs to be retained.

This is a significant move away from a black feminist standpoint that regards experience as the foundation of knowledge production, advocating an authentic black experience and an essentialized black woman. Through a flattening and homogenization of black women's experiences, the diversity of black women's experiences is ignored. Recognition of this diversity also helps to move towards regarding black women as active subjects with agency, not as passive victims, forever marginalized and in fixed structural locations.

## **Part Two: The Research**

### **Key Aims of the Thesis**

To restate, the key aims of the thesis are to:

- explore the idea of South Asian women's political agency through a historical and contemporary analysis
- shift the debate away from the victim status assigned to South Asian women through an exploration of their political involvement in organizations
- understand how South Asian women's experiences and the interpretations of identity feed into their political agency
- unravel some of the complexities involved in the construction of political identity, subjectivity and agency.

It is important to remember these aims because they provide the background to the research and the focus of the study. The first two chapters have

contextualized South Asian women as historical and contemporary political subjects. The rest of this chapter describes the methods for the gathering and analysis of the data which are presented in the following three chapters.

### **Gaining Access and the Sampling Frame**

This section will look at the ways I gained access to South Asian women. This research explores the experiences of a minority group, South Asian women, working and living within Greater London. The specificity of the research therefore excludes any analysis of white<sup>1</sup> or African-Caribbean women. Research concerning minority ethnic group women has demonstrated the complex nature of obtaining access (Werbner, 2002; Bhopal, 1997; Phoenix, 1994; Bhavnani, 1993; Edwards, 1990). The complexity is based on differences of 'race' and ethnicity, gender and class. My first concern after having decided to interview South Asian women was how would I be able to access a sufficient number for the research through the snowball sampling method? My concern with numbers later transpired not to be such a worrying aspect. Thoughts on access revolved around 'cold calling' to Asian women's organizations and asking for women who would be willing to participate in the interviews. I imagined that such a request would be interpreted as a drain on the resources of many over-worked women in voluntary organizations. Indeed, this view was to some extent confirmed by the fact that a high profile organization turned down my request without an explanation prompting me to use another strategy. This was to access women by becoming a management committee member of an Asian women's project. Retrospectively, although at first I felt disappointed by the terse response, later on in the research I was to discover that I had

managed to interview one woman who had, in the past, worked for this particular organization. This experience also acts as a reminder of the necessity of employing different strategies for obtaining access to the group to be researched.

Although the data from the interviews forms the main methods used in this study, as a result of the negative response from the above organization, I chose to join the management committee of an Asian women's organization for a period of four years. Although participant observation does not constitute a key method of data collection or analysis, the research gained from this method. This was a strategic move because by becoming a member I had accessed the gatekeepers of the study with the aim of facilitating access to South Asian women. It was envisaged that I would be able to access potential interviewees through the ethnographic method of 'snowball sampling'.

'Snowball sampling' in the ethnographic sense is used to refer to the number of people a researcher can be introduced to through initial contacts (Alexander, 2000 and 1996; Ostrander, 1993; Hoffmann, 1980). The initial contacts have also been referred to as 'guides' and 'informants' (Horowitz, 1983). The snowball method can hold different meanings in different contexts, for example, the snowballing of guides when studying gang behaviour can ensure only to an extent the safety and legitimacy of the researcher (Horowitz, 1983). In other cases, snowballing can occur in 'spatial partitioning', i.e. in different locations where people can be observed (Carpenter et al., 1988). This was relevant to my research, as I wanted to interview women in different locations across London.



In this study, I used the technique for a specific purpose - to make contact with other women, who were involved in similar work with South Asian women, both as workers and management committee members. Through establishing a rapport with the women on the management committee, my aim was to begin snowballing, i.e. to obtain an introduction to women who would agree to be interviewed. One of the consequences of the snowball method is the lack of control over the research sample and the dangers of 'selecting' interviewees of a certain group, for example religious or ancestral background. To avoid any bias and over reliance on the snowball sample method as the sole source of interviewees, I also continued calling different organizations who worked exclusively with South Asian women and those who had a brief to work with South Asian women. As a consequence, different types of organizations were accessed. These are described below.

### **Being on the 'Inside' and Developing Rapport**

An important part of my research involved joining the management committee of a South Asian women's organization. The procedure for joining included telephoning for an application form, applying formally, and an interview held at the local municipal buildings. Although it is usually done through personal referrals, Asian women's organizations also leaflet to recruit management committee members. My introduction came through a colleague who had received information about this particular organization. After the process of interviewing, I joined the management committee in June 1995, and took part in their training for new members. After joining, I realized that there were ethical questions to consider, e.g. my motives for joining – when would I come clean and why didn't I do this earlier? (See Part Three for discussion). Management

committee members are women who are usually professional but this is not a requirement. These women work in a variety of fields such as law, education, and the voluntary sector. Above all, I did not want to reveal that I had a motive so I decided to be a management committee member in the belief that I would be with like-minded women, and importantly, as a South Asian woman to make a positive contribution to the organization. My research diary reads:

"I was interviewed at [...] Town Hall in [...] for the role of management committee member for the Asian Women's Project which is located in London. I had filled in an application form which had asked for my views on domestic violence, my understanding of equal opportunities and Asian women's refuges, i.e. their purpose. It was on the basis of this that a young Asian woman conducted the 'interview'. So far so good. The interview was short and I have no idea what I'm letting myself in for. I have no idea what I must do to fulfil my role considering that I have not had any experience of being on a management committee."

I had to wait until the first management committee to find out the role I would play in this organization and what was expected of me. Being on the management committee was an interesting and informative experience and during the four year (1995-1999) period that I was a member, I became accustomed to the internal dynamics and politics of the group. The following is my experience of the first management committee meeting:

"I attended the first meeting (22.11.95) and was introduced to the other members. A couple of other women had also recently joined. I was given a quick training session on management committee membership – this is incredible, considering the amount of responsibility taken on! A representative from the London Borough Grants Unit (LBGU) also attended the meeting. We discussed various items ranging from workers' reports to finance and training for new management committee members. There are courses available but it's not economically viable to send all members. So the management committee decided to send one woman who could feed back information to the other members. The Project consists of three workers in the following areas: funding/development, child development, case work. All posts are

full time and emphasis is placed on a collective working structure and the work is 'crisis orientated'."

In the monthly meetings we discussed items ranging from, spaces for referrals, problems which were often highlighted regarding the clients, funding and fund-raising; to the internal structure of the organization. These meetings illustrated how the voluntary sector functions with a reliance on funding and the ability to write successful grant proposals, for example for 'Lottery Funding' and 'Help a London Child'. The money from 'Help a London Child' was specifically directed to the children of the women who came to the refuge. Often these women would secure social housing, only after spending a considerable time in the refuge. This experience helped to contextualize for me the work that some of the women interviewed were involved in, providing an insight into the workings of an organization.

There were many insights also into the politics of the organization with potential sources of disagreement concerning funding; changing the structure from non-hierarchical to hierarchical; how other organizations within the borough were regarded as competition or inadequate. This information was usually revealed during the journey back home when two to three members of the organization (workers and management committee members) would share a car trip to north London.

During my fieldwork I was also employed as a Lecturer in Sociology in a university and was at the beginning of my academic career. This aspect of my life was revealed in some interviews and not in others. The usefulness of this fact also varied particularly in connection with arranging interviews. However, it

was not as an academic that I met and interviewed women. It was more likely on the basis of myself being involved in Asian women's issues as a management committee member of an Asian women's project which effectively provided me with a passport to other similar organizations. The status of management committee member also provided me with the necessary credentials for approaching other organizations, in addition to being recommended as a reliable and trustworthy researcher. Throughout the fieldwork which began in 1996 and was completed by 1998, I continued as a management committee member, and resigned in 1999 to move on to a different organization, Rights of Women. At the time of writing I have continued in my role within this organization. During the research period, in the Asian women's project, friendships with women were formed and I attended several social events such as Christmas dinners and parties.

In addition, during the period from 1996 to 1998, I was formally asked by organizations, where I conducted interviews, to become a management committee member. The women I interviewed referred me on to other organizations; sometimes they had spoken about the research in advance of me contacting potential interviewees. This highlights the reciprocal nature of rapport. Often especially amongst Asian women's projects, it became evident that the women operated an informal network. In the first eight months I had learned a great deal about similar organizations in different parts of London, the sharing of information; joint research into issues concerning South Asian women; campaigns and supporting other organizations' initiatives such as 'the one year rule'<sup>2</sup> or demonstrating in Bradford against 'bounty hunters'<sup>3</sup> who were increasingly employed by the families of runaway young women. After eight



months of being a management committee member, I told the other members about my proposed research, at the end of a meeting. In retrospect I think that because I had gone through the selection procedure and had shown my commitment to voluntary work, I received a favourable response from them. Also given the paucity of information, particularly academic knowledge about South Asian women's agency, the management committee was supportive of the research.

Shortly afterwards, I had arranged an interview with one of the caseworkers in May 1996. This was a fruitful interview because this caseworker was also connected to another Asian Women's organization as a management committee member. Therefore I could envisage access to other women. In fact I interviewed women who were attached as management committee members in one organization and were the caseworkers in another. After this, recommendations were given to me and the women I interviewed referred me on to others. The snowball sampling method therefore had proved to be sufficient to yield a high number of positive responses. I wrote the following four entries at the beginning of my research in my diary which comment on the ease of getting women to be interviewed and their willingness to participate:

"Arranged to interview the case worker, Sofia at the Project. I felt that I could ask her since I have known her for about five months. I have felt insecure about asking her before because I didn't want her to think that I had simply joined the Project to obtain interviews. Being on the management committee to fulfil your own needs is something that is not desirable, and features in the introductory information about the Project. However, when I asked Sofia she wasn't in the slightest hesitant. I think she was actually flattered that I had asked her."

“Contacted Parvati, she was keen to be interviewed. I have arranged for the interview to take place at her home.”

“Contacted Neesha, a resource centre worker. She knows Parvati who used to work in an Asian women’s project which was closed down due to misappropriation of funds. She’s agreed to be interviewed.

“I was lucky today. I managed to arrange an interview with a Case worker, Vijay, in Neesha’s organization.”

Had I realized the ease at which this task could be accomplished I would not have waited to ask these women. Glucksmann found that ‘sending the customary letter explaining myself and guaranteeing confidentiality definitely put some people off’ (Glucksmann, 1994:161). Sending letters to organizations indicates in some cases that researchers need to be cautious with such methods. Similarly, I found that instead of using a letter that ‘cold calling’ (as described above) worked successfully on a number of occasions. Thus establishing links by telephone worked positively for this study.

## **Ethical Concerns**

In this chapter I have attempted to integrate the ethical concerns of the research in the different sections through the use of reflexivity and my research diary. The diary illustrates my approach to obtaining interviews and my concerns about how the women would respond to the research. Although the integrative approach is used regarding ethical concerns, there are specific issues that I want to address in this section – confidentiality and anonymity. The British Sociological Association’s Code of ethical Practice states:

Research participants should understand how far they will be afforded anonymity and confidentiality and should be able to reject the use of data gathering devices such as tape-recorders and video cameras.

(British Sociological Association, 1992:704)

After arranging the interviews, I had explained individually to the women who had agreed to participate that the information they were going to give me would be taped – all the women agreed to be recorded. I had assured them of their privacy and that I would maintain anonymity and confidentiality through the whole process of research (Heath and Luff, 1995; Newell, 1995; Procter, 1995). One of my concerns was whether the tape-recorder would be a distraction. As I found out later, none of the women were distracted, even after clipping a small microphone to their clothing. The women agreed to be taped after I had guaranteed them confidentiality and anonymity. Some were concerned that anything they said could identify them in any way, therefore they requested copies of the interview transcript. One of the research 'rules' to follow is the maintenance of non-identification of interviewees through the data collected, i.e. readers should not be able to identify the participants (Barnes, 1979). To prevent this and for reasons of consistency, I have used suitable pseudonyms for the women. The names of the projects have also been omitted and replaced with 'Asian Women's Project', 'Asian Women's Advisory Project', Youth Project; 'Antiracism Organization', 'Asian Women's Centre', 'Minority Ethnic Women's Training Project', and 'Muslim Women's Organization'. The research was conducted in different London boroughs, however I have omitted the names of the boroughs.

Despite these efforts I could not really offer the women a *watertight* notion of anonymity and if the research was published or disseminated, they may be identifiable. There is an additional question around the use of pseudonyms, who chooses them? As I have stated above, I made those choices, and with hindsight I could have asked the women to suggest names so that if they read the research they could identify themselves. I did not ask any of the women if they would have preferred the use of their real names and with hindsight I realized I could have done.

Although the issues of confidentiality and anonymity have come to be regarded as the ethical pre-requisites for research, especially qualitative, there may be some participants who would not have wanted anonymity. This is evident in the research on the effect of cancer of young people on their families, carried out by Grbich (1999) in which participants wanted the use of their real names rather than pseudonyms.

Although ethical issues concern all types of research, it is significant in qualitative research. I consider myself to be an ethical person (most people do) therefore I informed the women of my intentions and the research – honesty and being open resulted in the willingness and sometimes enthusiasm of the women I interviewed. However, whilst I am able to confidently state that I had been honest with the women with reference to the above, as is clear from my earlier discussion, I had a dual motive for joining the management committee. During the first eight months I could not tell them about my intentions but as I stated earlier their response was positive. However, on reflection they had not asked me if I had decided to carry out the research about South Asian women,



before or after I joined the management committee. Thus, in connection with ethics, morals and politics, Janet Finch comments:

The sociologist who produces work about women, therefore, has a special responsibility to anticipate whether it could be interpreted and used in ways quite different from her own intentions [...] crucial to a feminist doing research on women: namely that collective, not merely individual, interests are at stake. The latter may be relatively easily secured with guarantees of confidentiality, anonymity, codes of ethics and so on. It is far more difficult to devise ways of ensuring that information given so readily in interviews will not be used ultimately against the collective interests of women.

(Finch, 1993:175-176).

In my study I was gathering data from the experiences of South Asian women which could be regarded as a political activity. There were major issues to deal with in connection with South Asian women, ranging from political activity, domestic violence, sexism and policing in the community, sexualities, and the role of religion. Thus, I did not morally want 'to get it wrong' by misrepresenting the women who had shared their experiences with me. The next section therefore describes the interviewees.

### **The Interviewees**

As mentioned above, one of the main aims of the research is to explore the variety of ways in which South Asian women can be described as politically active. It is with reference to a broader understanding of what constitutes 'the political' that the research looks at organizational forms of South Asian women's political activities. A broader understanding of political agency enables a move away from conceptualizing South Asian women as victims. This is a prime

rationale for my choice of women working in organizations that were related to 'race' or South Asian women.

The research was carried out in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews with twenty-four South Asian women, during the period May 1996 to May 1998. Their age ranged from 21 years to 57 years. Some of the women were born in England, others migrated with their parents and some others entered the country as spouses. All women, including those with parents who had migrated to East Africa and Mauritius, stated that their origins were from the Indian subcontinent - India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh. The interviewees were from three religious groups: Hindu (8), Muslim (9) and Sikh (7). (See Appendix 1 for details of the women interviewed)

The women worked in different London boroughs and were mainly approached through women's projects. From the women based projects I consulted, four were originally set up for Muslim women, one specifically for Pakistani women. Issues of social positioning - of 'race' and gender - as well as those of their agency, their ability to act individually and collectively were explored in the women's narratives. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed women the opportunity for reflection and explanation.

The aim of the research was also to explore difference and diversity amongst South Asian women. Thus, the women I interviewed were employed in a diverse range of organizations including refuges, resource centres, women's centres, anti-racist organizations, youth projects and employment and educational projects that work with South Asian women, as well as religious

organizations for women. The women were engaged in these organizations in a range of capacities, as refuge workers, caseworkers, debt counsellors, counsellors, campaign co-ordinators and trainers. Although they occupied a variety of political positions, it is important to emphasize the commonalities they share in the space they occupy. Brah comments on the political diversity of groups and the commonalities shared through oppression – racism and sexism:

It is not easy to categorise these groups along some conventional notion of a political continuum from the 'Right' to the 'Left'. The multi-faceted nature of our oppression demands resistance at so many different levels that such labels become quite problematic. Organizations whose *raison d'être* is religious or caste exclusivity, for example, will actively support and/or join in with members of other religions and castes in a range of anti-racist activities.

(Brah, 1996: 82)

This was evident in the collaborative work done by the different Asian women's organizations as described above. The London boroughs in which the women worked are as follows: Brent, Greenwich, Hackney, Hounslow, Islington, Lambeth, Newham, and Tower Hamlets. All were Labour held boroughs. Demographic profiles of each borough show a significant South Asian population. The reasons for selecting a research sample within these boroughs was to compare geographically, the location of the projects the women were involved in. Therefore I interviewed women in various locations in London, mostly in boroughs with a substantial South Asian population or mixed minority ethnic groups (See Appendices 3 and 4 for a minority ethnic composition of Great Britain and London).

## The Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured covering a number of areas that I wanted to explore – work, personal life and relationship to their family. At first I drew up a list of questions under two headings, work and personal/family, with a total of twenty-nine (see Appendix 2 for the interview questions). Initially I had interviewed an African-Caribbean woman (Justine) at my place of work, due to her involvement in black women's projects in the past. Regarding it as a 'pilot' interview, with questions posed to the dynamics of black women's organizations. My thinking behind this was to test out some of the areas I wanted to explore with Asian women, in connection with political agency. The questions were later used when I interviewed South Asian women. After the first interview, it became apparent that the questions were answered without me going through the list I had so meticulously prepared. By letting the interviewee 'just talk' the themes which were important to my research began to emerge. This was also evident in the first interview I conducted with a South Asian woman during which she talked about her experiences at work, her reasons for carrying out this work, 'race' and cultural identity, experiences of living in London, support networks, religion and the community. This was in much the same way as Justine spoke of black women's involvement in women's groups, the ways in which they conducted themselves within the black community, and raising issues considered to be controversial such as sexual abuse or lesbianism.

In the first interview with a South Asian woman, I was able to focus and ask open ended questions, and the questions I had drawn up previously acted as prompts. On the basis of the first interview I also included additional prompt



questions. The approach to these questions and the themes I wanted to cover varied according to the character of the interview, i.e. some women spoke hesitantly requiring prompting, whilst the majority showed enthusiasm. The transcripts mostly indicate very few interruptions from myself. This is consistent with my aim to explore the nature of expression within the text of the women interviewed.

The interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. The interviews were conducted mainly at the women's place of work with the exception of the following locations: in the interviewee's home, at South Bank University, in a public house<sup>4</sup>. The time period of the interview varied between forty-five minutes to one and a half hours. One interview was shorter (approximately thirty minutes) due to two interviewees<sup>5</sup> (counted as one interview) not wishing to answer the questions in connection with their personal lives and their relationship to their families. As a result, the structure of each interview varied according to their willingness in answering questions, and the amount of time available for the interview in their working schedules. Some interviewees gave the whole afternoon to ask questions and enjoyed the opportunity to speak to another person about their experiences and to introduce clients of their and other workers in the projects. The women interviewed varied in age, religion, and status within the organization. Some were founding members, others with an involvement due to their personal circumstances.

Through conducting the interviews mainly in the workplace I gained knowledge through observing how the women dealt with interruptions due to emergencies, clients living in refuges, women attending classes and more generally the

environment in which they worked. This included their offices and location geographically in London. This experience contextualized for me the words spoken by these women. Other factors which are considered to be important aspects in the women's narratives are the environment and location (Gilbert, 1993). These factors contribute to positioning the interviewee.

### **Part Three: Reflexivity in the Research Process**

#### **The Importance of Locating the Researcher in the Research Process**

Reflexivity forms an important part of an ethical research process and within the idea of what constitutes 'good research', in particular for those committed to feminist research methods, it signifies writing the researcher into the research. It is an approach that emphasizes a critical approach to the influence of the researcher on the research process. Researchers are implicated in their research as we cannot perceive ourselves simply as 'objective observers' thus our own biographies and subjective experiences, i.e. our histories are connected to the research process (Stanley and Wise, 1993). It is a kind of 'seeing the unseen', reflexivity helps us to see those things which are seemingly too close to us to be visible in the research process. Methodologically, reflexivity involves making explicit the positionality of the researcher. Thus writing in the researcher allows a deeper and contextual understanding of the research, Stanley and Wise note:

All human attributes are brought into the research situation by researchers, are inevitably brought into it, whether this is library research or research 'in the field' [...] It is this which we argue must be made explicit within feminist research. We believe that the way to do it is to make 'the researcher' and her consciousness the central focus of the research experience. We refer to it as the 'research experience' because we see it as an experience like any other, not as

something different, special or separated-off through the adoption of special techniques such as 'objectivity'.

(Stanley and Wise, 1993:59)

I regard these interviews as 'partial' encounters and through my choice of joining an Asian women's project which I hoped would facilitate the research, I needed to consider the influence of my own subjectivity and interpretation of the data generated through the interviews. As stated above, through writing myself into the research process, i.e. to write an account and to be accountable with reference to the interaction between myself and the women interviewed, allows for a more personal, rather than a distant observational account. Thus the narratives of the women interviewed construct a version of the social world in which I am implicated. It is a product of the *interaction* between the interviewees and the researcher. I therefore have contributed in this construction. Far from the narratives representing a 'truth', the interviews provide data which allow an insight into the experiences ('partial' encounters) of people (Silverman, 1993). Thus I was taken aback by the firm reply from one of the interviewees when I proffered 'culture' as an explanation for South Asian women's oppression:

*'Who is making it cultural? It is us and I think that sometimes it is no good blaming men, I think women have to change and unless women change, men will never change.'*

(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

Including myself in the research process assists in the discussions regarding rapport, power relations and positioning in the interview, the significance of same 'race' and gender interviewing, and knowledge production. These are issues to which I now turn.

## The Obstacles of Similarity in Interviewing: 'Race' and Ethnic Identifications

The impact of 'race' in the research process continues to be central to the debate of whether those sharing a 'race' can produce 'better or more authentic' data (Bhopal, 1997; Watson, 1997; Phoenix, 1994; Edwards, 1993; Bhavnani, 1993; Edwards, 1990). 'Authenticity' is problematic because the data produced is more likely to represent the interactions and relationship between the researcher and researched during the time of the interview. Interviews provide a 'snapshot' of people's lives (Skeggs, 1994), they do not give us of the full picture, but involve positioning within discourses and locations in society and the dynamic between researcher and researched. Narratives given in interviews can also differ according to the 'race' of the interviewer. Ann Phoenix (1994) found in her interviews with black interviewees that the extent to which racial issues were discussed depended on the 'race' of the interviewer. Thus more controversial aspects of 'race' were discussed with black researchers on the basis of a shared 'black' identity, racism and colonial experiences. Questions of racial or ethnic identity were asked in this research and often, the women gave elaborated responses with examples. It illustrated that they were being asked a difficult question and answered accordingly, i.e. their 'Asian' identity was just as important as being regarded as 'black' (some interviews refused the label 'black'). The following are examples of the difference 'race' makes to the interview findings:

*'I use black in certain contexts [...] I perceive myself to be a young black woman who encounters a number of problems because of the colour of my skin. I mean I use black in certain contexts but I perceive myself as British Asian, black Asian even but you know if you expect me not to acknowledge that I'm Asian, I don't think is very good. We were at a black student conference and I was speaking to a friend of mine and I said something to the effect of black and Asian students, and he said, "no, you're all black". I said, "don't try to define*



*who I am and don't try to impose terminologies and expect me to use them." I'm not comfortable with those terms.'*  
(Zora, Antiracism Organization)

*'In this society as a whole I'm black but at the same time I'm Asian because I've got a different culture.'*  
(Parvati, Asian Women's Project)

*'I'm Asian definitely, black doesn't mean anything to me, I feel Asian.'*  
(Parminder, Asian Women's Project)

The above illustrates the difference and diversity amongst the South Asian group and these types of responses may not have been different had I been a white researcher<sup>6</sup> Had I been a white researcher, I may have inhibited their responses but equally have produced different data and alternative insights into the question of 'race' (Bhavnani, 1993). Other researchers have found that sometimes a different 'race' interviewer may make the interviewees feel more confident and not regard them with suspicion (Phoenix, 1994) and respect anonymity (Mirza, 1992).

Before I began the research I had assumed that as an Asian woman, I would gain unlimited access to South Asian women. The following two are examples of Asianness preventing a deeper discussion and Asianness that allowed access to women who were willing to be interviewed. My 'Asianness' or being the same 'race' prevented one interviewee from expressing herself on the assumption that 'I would understand' what she meant after the information she gave me about her husband. The understanding is based on prejudices within the Asian community about African-Caribbean partners who are not considered to be appropriate choices for both women and men. The question posed to her

is in the context of her talking freely about her relationship with her family and why she had not seen them for a long period of time. It had been a painful experience for her because her parents had not accepted her choice of partner. During the period she had told me that her father had died and she had not attended the funeral but had watched from afar. Her parents thought that she had defiled the honour of the family and a consequence of this she had been ostracized from the family. At the point of asking I did not know her partner's heritage. Thus when Sonya disclosed personal information about her husband who is African-Caribbean, she became reluctant to speak further. It was almost as if she expected a negative reaction from me, perhaps with hindsight it is safe to say that she had conditioned herself to a negative reaction from Asians.

Shaminder: *Is your partner English?*

Sonya: *He's African-Caribbean.*

Shaminder: *Right. What do they [parents] think of that?*

Sonya: *What didn't they think of that, I'll let you make your own conclusions.*

I tried again:

Shaminder: *But what is it about black men, you know, Asian women marrying black men or having a black partner, an African-Caribbean partner?*

Sonya: *A taboo.*

Shaminder: *Yeah. A taboo subject.*

Sonya: *You tell me.*

So I talked about stereotypical representations of black men in the media and the South Asian acceptance of such ideas. I noticed that once I had set the wheels in motion, Sonya responded and started to talk. In this exchange there was an assumption on her part that I would understand what she meant as soon as she had disclosed that she had a black partner. Although I had understood exactly what she meant (understanding of Asian prejudice), I did not want to appear to be making an assumption. Therefore I deliberately prompted



her to answer and although there was some initial resistance, it encouraged an interesting response that included comments on the Hindu understanding of purity/pollution, the caste system and chromatism.

The above demonstrates that an assumed commonality such as 'race' and cultural understanding prevented Sonya from expressing her feelings regarding the extent of racial prejudice against African-Caribbean men. It was assumed and put into a questioning statement, "*you tell me*", i.e. "as an Asian woman you should know and understand the negative reactions of parents." As I admitted earlier also, I did know but wanted her to tell me, to give her explanation or her side of the story. This example illustrates that same 'race' interviewing does not produce data that can be regarded as the 'truth' or that which is 'valid'. In fact through this lens of 'same 'race' interviewing', it is easy to overlook the impact of the 'race', class, gender trajectory. There are also additional factors, for example, age, religion and education differences which can have a bearing on the research process. As I have found in this research, being Asian does not mean that a research relationship will be positive. On the contrary, over identification politically made it difficult for me to distance myself from the research. Both identification and disagreement made 'critical distance' awkward. Instead I positioned the women I disagreed with as the 'Other' – the category 'South Asian' is not homogeneous.

The second example illustrates that through identifying myself as 'Asian', it also allowed for commonalities. I found this enabled me to *overcome* certain difficulties within the research process. However, there were questions for me about identifying with being 'Asian'. As an Asian woman, I have had very little to

do with other Asian women, except as colleagues at work and in the setting up of a South Asian researchers' forum. In this sense I felt like a fraud, what did I know about the lives of Asian women outside academia or my immediate family? This was expressed earlier because I had a dual motive for joining the management committee of an Asian women's project. Other methods of access included a colleague working for an antiracism organization who introduced me to one of their workers. Eight women agreed to be interviewed on the basis of a phone call which included making references to being a management committee member of an Asian women's organization, and to the numbers of women who had already been interviewed.

The ease of access that I experienced was made possible only after I had joined an organization. It was this 'insider' status rather than a focus on 'race' *per se* that enabled the research to continue. Most women were co-operative and commented positively on the research, even those who had expressed reluctance to talk with me initially. Most of the women interviewed were graduates, some postgraduates and as such were aware of their positioning on a structural, historical and political basis.

The construction of the stereotypical South Asian woman was evident in the narratives; a role that was being challenged through their role as active agents in society. Through their participation in an interview, they were given the opportunity to talk about their experiences (both work and personal), i.e. it created a space for their voices to be heard (Sudbury, 1998; Mama, 1995; Wilson, 1978). This supports the assertion that listening to women's voices is crucial in feminist research particularly with reference to knowledge production



(Reinharz, 1992) and to challenging pathologizing discourses (Brah, 1992b). South Asian women's voices in my research highlight their experiences, not as an 'authentic truth' but as a method of uncovering how their subjectivity is constructed and the 'discursive character of experience' (Scott, 1992). I have used such an approach in this thesis as it allows for a more informed understanding of subject positioning in relation to South Asian women.

The reclaiming of voices has been central to the black feminist movement and to this research which explores political identity and agency. Political organization has equally been important and Parmar comments on this:

To organise self-consciously as black women was and continues to be important; that form of organization is not arbitrary, but is based on a political analysis of our common economic, social and cultural oppressions.

(Parmar, 1990:106).

Similarly, for me the research was an opportunity to challenge the stereotypical notions of South Asian womanhood and to present these women as active agents in identity construction. However as feminist researchers have found in the past, the recovering of 'lost' voices is not an easy task to present in a form that is easily accessible to both academics and the community. The reliance on an academic style often results in the exclusion of the participants through the power of interpreting the data. To overcome the issue of inaccessibility, some researchers who have carried out ethnographic research, have involved the participants in the reading of manuscripts prior to publication (for example, see Alexander, 2000). It is the involvement of participants and the longevity of relationships which facilitates this process. My attempts to overcome

inaccessibility were limited due to the academic nature of the presentation however they did extend to a few of the women who requested copies of their transcripts.

### **Power Relations and Knowledge Production**

In my efforts to ensure responses from the women, I had prepared a list of questions and prompts and memorized the whole interview schedule. I had not experienced any problems with the women I interviewed (except see the interview above) until I interviewed two women who insisted on being interviewed together (Valerie and Premjit). The following is an extract from the interview that followed on from a discussion about women who come to the refuge and their dealings with the family.

*Shaminder: Do you have a good relationship with your family? Premjit: What's it got to do with the research?*

*Valerie: We don't have a hidden agenda, we come from normal, steady family backgrounds.*

The above attempt to gain information about their personal lives could be regarded as intrusive, however it was contextualized and this question had not up until this interview produced such a negative reaction. After an awkward silence, one of the interviewees, Valerie then continued and suggested interviewing another worker:

*Patricia: I enjoy my job, I like the job. I wouldn't be here if I didn't enjoy it. You need that to work in a women's organization. Ring and ask for Pardeep, the youth worker, and ring in four weeks time, she would be willing to be interviewed especially in connection with her work with young women.*

Reflecting on the interview, my research diary reads:



“ I do not have any biographical details for Valerie and Premjit [...] I ended up having to justify my questions and I felt a certain amount of hostility towards me for asking a question on their relationship with their families. It was hard work getting them to talk because they were suspicious of the research and the questions I was asking. It certainly has given me the opportunity to think about the answers from most of the other interviewees that were fairly open. I felt as if they didn't want to divulge any information and that they were reserved about the answers. A very unrelaxed meeting. I was taken aback by the sharp reply. Although they suggested that I interview the youth worker, I came away feeling very disheartened.”

By the end of the interview, I had not obtained detailed biographical notes on these two women. This had proved to be relatively straight forward with most of the other women interviewed. Retrospectively, by the end of the interview they had informed me that there had been a crisis on the day at the centre. This had been the reason for the interruptions during the interview and for the general feeling of nervousness. Despite being a 'non-typical' encounter this interview highlights the ways in which participants in interviewing try to take control of the process. Sue Scott (1984) also describes in her research how differences in status prevented her from asking questions. Indeed class and status have been identified as factors that make it possible for participants to refuse to answer questions (Tang, 2002; Puwar, 1997; Cotterill). The refusal of these women to my answer questions on their families might be interpreted as concealment. Although at the time I thought I had no strategy to deal with such a situation, with hindsight I could have asked further questions about their work in the refuge. The strategies to deal with non co-operation are not clear in methods literature (except see Edwards, 1990, 1993). Personal questions were met with hesitancy also by one other interviewee who had not expected such questions, however, she had continued although I sensed that it made her feel

uncomfortable. By the end of the interview she had relaxed and was talking openly.

Refusing to answer questions raises the question of power relations within an interview situation. LaFrance and Henley suggest that 'power is sustained, in part, through the exercise of apparent composure and concealment' (LaFrance and Henley, 1994: 293). Thus the women above, in comparison to those who had been forthcoming in disclosing information, assumed a position of power in the interview. However the research relationship can be shaped through changing imbalances of power, even when there are no observable power differentials. Thus there can be moments when the interviewer can assume a position of 'structural domination' and 'structural subordination' (Bhavnani, 1993:101). Even if I accept the power that lies with me to interpret information, in relation to the women above who did not want to answer questions, I could not help feeling like a supplicant. In comparison although I also experienced disclosure of information, often intimate and sensitive, other disclosures consisted of 'insider' information that sometimes the interviewees felt that they had to express.

Denying information can also be on the part of the researcher, for example on some occasions I did not reveal to the interviewee that I knew the person being referred to. It would have not been considered diplomatic to reveal information that may have inhibited a response as it was possible to gauge the animosity between organizations through the interview. Often it was the case that I had interviewed the woman in question. In one interview, the woman interviewed was surprised to discover that I lived in the borough as she had divulged a great



deal of information about local politicians and their attitudes towards women. Had she known, her response may not have been so forthcoming.

Continuing with the idea of disclosing intimate information, one aspect that Reinharz (1992) discusses is in connection with stress during interviews and through the process of transcribing, i.e. listening to the women describing their pain. This is usually associated with interviewing traumatised women and Reinharz quotes other researchers who relive the pain of the interviewees, or who wish to escape or avoid it. In the same way I often found myself in interviews with women who would disclose intimate details of their lives concerning physical and mental abuse from families, death of a parent, being the main carer for a parent or being told to leave the family home. One interviewee cried during the interview but it was not clear why she had. Even towards the end of the interview and after I had asked her why, she did not disclose the reason except that it was in the context of violence against women. Emotional entanglement is something which is difficult to theorize, and I too experienced sadness and tears when I listened to their stories - 'I could see the woman's face and hear her exclamations and pain' (Thompson in Reinharz 1992:35). Reinharz comments on the researchers' reactions:

All of these stressful reactions occur, I believe, because feminist researchers discover there is more pain in the interviewees' lives than they suspected. The interview process gives the researcher an intimate view of this pain and the shock of discovery may eventually force her to confront her own vulnerability.

(Reinharz, 1992:36)

Thus it becomes important to understand the relationship between mind, body and emotions (Stanley and Wise, 1993). The importance of this is expressed by Judith Stacey as 'the lives, loves and tragedies that fieldwork informants share with a researcher are ultimately data – grist for the ethnographic mill' (Stacey, 1991:113). Research rarely features emotions in the accounts given by researchers, this is despite the many ways emotions filter into the research process.

Another aspect of the interview process is the concealment by the interviewer of personal opinions that are in direct conflict with the interviewee. This is discussed in Donna Luff's (1999) work in which she comments on the difficulties of interviewing women whose views are radically different from her own. Although the women, described as 'anti-feminist' (Luff, 1999) had welcomed her and she had established a relationship of trust, she states:

It was a balance that that I feel I managed with varying degrees of success. In practice, in my research the whole area of 'deceit' became quite intense and complex. Listening to views, nodding or saying simple 'ums' or 'I see', to views that you strongly disagree with or, ordinarily, would strive to challenge, may be true to a methodology that aims to listen seriously to the views and experiences of others but can feel personally very difficult and lead to a questioning of the whole research agenda.

(Luff, 1999:698)

In my experience of interviewing I had not questioned the research agenda and although I had felt uncomfortable with certain responses it had not prevented me from seeking out viewpoints which differed from mine considerably. However similar to Luff's experience, I found that when I interviewed some women, from religious based organizations, I also nodded or commented with

'right' and 'okay'. This was particularly evident on the question of modesty in connection with dress and attire of Muslim women. The women interviewed positioned themselves as dressing with dignity in comparison to Western women who dress provocatively, often according to them, paying the consequences, i.e. rape or sexual assault. Mumtaz commented on this:

*'Women invited the men by wearing a mini-skirt and this is why there are so many rapes in society. The women invite them.'*

(Mumtaz, Muslim Women's Organization)

The above statement revealed to me that Mumtaz had identified with my Asianness and that she was under the impression that I would understand what she meant. Far from identifying with these women on the basis of being South Asian, I had distanced myself from such a position. I left this interview agitated as I had not expected such statements to be made and neither had I responded to them. Had they expected me to agree with them? I felt my feminist principles were compromised and wondered why I had endured it. I could only justify my lack of response on the basis that I had to take notes in a different language to the one being spoken. I had also made a judgement on the need to acquire data. Therefore, I could not be 'honest' during the interview. Initially I had arranged an interview with Mumtaz, the main interviewee. However on my arrival, I found myself sitting centre stage with about eight Muslim women, waiting to be interviewed as a group. I was not prepared for this and with the technical difficulties with the tape recorder, the pressure to gather the data was intensified. After the interview I realized that I would have to ask Mumtaz to be interviewed on her own at a later date. The second time was made easier due to the fact that it was conducted in English whereas the previous encounter had been in Urdu. I do not have extensive knowledge of Urdu and, with some



difficulty, I asked the questions in a mixture of Urdu and Punjabi, translating it into English during the interview. When I left the venue, I felt an enormous weight lifting off my shoulders because during the interview I had felt suffocated. Later I had questioned why I had felt like this - I was reacting to Mumtaz's attire, she wore a black *chador* whilst most of the other women did not. I felt 'unfree' for her as I observed her being consumed in the rhetoric of Islam and equality of men and women, it was also apparent that she was their 'leader'.

However, I needed to build up a relationship of trust which involved being non-judgemental, thus as Luff points out regarding 'rapport' in an interview, it does not necessarily have to be in the classical sense of the word:

I would argue that rapport can be experienced as challenging and provocative in certain situations, and can act as a stimulus to new thoughts about the research process and the emerging issues. In particular, my fieldwork experiences reflect the ways in which the researcher, as much as the participant, draws on her own conflicting, often contradictory aspects of identity as resources in the interaction.

(Luff, 1999:697)

Indeed, rapport may be based on a shared identity, i.e. class or 'race'. Luff's experience in her research indicates aspects that are not usually considered in research – dress. In a similar way, I had preconceptions of orthodox Muslim women before meeting Mumtaz. Retrospectively, I am unable to overcome my own negative reaction to the *chador* or her provocative views. But I had managed to maintain a level of rapport to facilitate the interview. Ann Phoenix captures this type of reaction and its manageability in the following statement:



Since the whole point of interviews is to evoke respondents' accounts rather than hear one's own discourses reflected back, I would argue that this [through non-identification] is usually interesting data rather than upsetting and that it is manageable within the interview context.

(Phoenix, 1994:57)

Interviewing religious women had not been my concern during the research design. However, it had become more apparent during the course of the research that this was an aspect of identity and agency that I would have to consider. Through interviewing Mumtaz and other Muslim women, I would say 'that 'rapport' can be experienced as challenging and provocative in certain research situations, and can act as a stimulus to new thoughts about the research process and the emerging issues' (Luff, 1999:696-697). This is an example of not identifying with a group of women which can result in a 'second distancing', i.e. distancing of the researcher from the researched, resulting in the inscription of the 'Other' (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994)). In my research I realize that I have to a certain extent made these women the 'Other'. It is as a result of identifying more with younger women who did not use religion as a means to claim equality. Instead their appeal was made on the grounds of emancipatory feminism, although these are not the words the women would use to describe their involvement.

Through the process of interviewing women I realized that they had identified commonalities of 'race' and ethnicity with me and I had identified differences. Researching across dimensions of difference had however, provided different and richer data (Luff, 1999). The difficulties I experienced in the interview with Mumtaz were contradictory to my political and personal beliefs. They compromised and challenged my feminist approach to the research. The power

of interpretation of her words however, lay with me. Wolf expresses this in the following statement:

Feminist dilemmas in fieldwork are "as much ethical and personal as academic and political" (Hale, 1991:121); they gnaw at our core, challenging our integrity, our work, and at times, the *raison d'être* of our projects. Feminist dilemmas in fieldwork revolve around power, often displaying contradictory, difficult and irreconcilable positions for the researcher. Indeed, the power dimension is threaded through the fieldwork and post fieldwork process and has created a major identity crisis for many feminist researchers.

(Wolf, 1996:1)

The issues Wolf covers are in connection with power and while one of the facets includes power differences resulting from the different 'race' positionalities of the researched and the researcher, it is clear from my research that power may also be a facet of research within the 'raced-same'.

Power also results from the methods employed to interpret data and exploitation. The data collected in my research consists of interview transcripts. The narratives of the women interviewed provided the basis of this research. I have analysed the narratives by using three major themes – racism, sexism and religion. These three themes provide the conceptual framework of linking political agency (individual and collective) to the context of structural processes.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown how the study was carried out; the methods used for accessing South Asian women, the sampling frame and the use of the method 'snowball sampling'. I have been able to show that although this study does not include any extended participant observation, it is however, broad

based in the context of the methods used to access South Asian women. Through joining a management committee of an Asian Women's Project, I was able to locate women who I perceived to be the gatekeepers of the study and other women to interview. Thus, I regarded it almost as a 'passport' to other similar organizations or women working within a specified brief. My dual motives for joining the organization and my subsequent disclosure of this information had not impacted on the attitude of the women. Conversely, it had a positive impact.

I have also, as a consequence of questioning what constitutes feminist research, interrogated the concept 'experience' and have found that a deeper understanding of it is necessary to carry out feminist research. Above all I have found that although there can be collective histories and identities, South Asian women cannot be regarded as a homogeneous group because of their multiple identifications. The impact of 'race' fluctuates therefore, same 'race' does not necessarily guarantee better data. In fact the idea that rapport facilitates a 'better' interview is questionable. I have found that assumptions on the basis of shared 'race' can work to inhibit the collection of data. However, by employing some methods of feminist research I have been able to reflect on the research process and have shown how feminist research can incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methods, the result of which can impact on social policy. The following three chapters therefore, examine the qualitative data collected in the research through the themes of racism, sexism and religion.



## NOTES

1. One of the women interviewed however was initially accompanied by her employer (white British), a barrister. Although her participation was not requested, references made by her, have been included due to her involvement in human rights and because they form points of political mobilization for South Asian women. As a barrister on the international circuit, she had an awareness of politically charged subjects such as forced marriage.
2. The 'one year rule' applies to women who have entered the country to marry. The rule affects South Asian women fleeing domestic violence as they can be deported during the first year of their marriage if they no longer reside with the husband.
3. 'Bounty hunters' refers to men who are employed by parents of runaway Asian girls to return them home forcibly.
4. This was the one of the most difficult interviews to conduct as it took place in a public place with many distractions. It also involved finding the right place as I had misunderstood the name of the public house the interviewee had given me. We had a meal and during the interview I was anxious that the interview would be audible.
5. The two women are Premjit and Valerie.
6. For a detailed discussion of cultural identification see Song and Parker (1995).



## **Chapter 5**

### **'Race', Agency and Political Activism**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I will explore the variety of ways that women's activism, knowledge production and culture intersect with 'race'. I will be using the narratives of the women interviewed to locate ideas about the self, and to incorporate the issue of agency. The focus of this chapter is 'race' and to explore how Asian women have engaged in the struggle against forms of racial oppression. It demonstrates how issues such as deportation, institutional racism and domestic violence have propelled women from a variety of backgrounds into action. The women's involvement in different types of organizations involves resistance to racism on a number of levels. My main aim is to belie the myth of passivity, to counteract the objectifying of women, an ideology with colonial roots (see Chapter Three). Despite South Asian women being deeply embedded in patriarchal, racial and class discourses, it becomes possible to present them as self-defining and active subjects. Indeed I would argue that it is precisely the stereotypical image of the South Asian woman as a passive subject without agency that is challenged by the women in this research. Instead a more active and assertive self is constructed in the process of struggling for equality and rights.

Racist, sexist and class oppression can have a compounding effect on the lives of Asian women. Despite its socially constructed character it has been argued that the category 'race' features as one of the most important tools in the analysis of patterns and processes of racist inequality, whether discursive or

material. Omi and Winant draw attention to how racial meanings shape categories of 'race' which are themselves determined by 'social, economic and political forces' (Omi and Winant 1986:61). Taking this into account, the racialization of South Asian women in Britain is threefold. *Firstly*, in the context of colonial discourse as shown in Chapter Three, the South Asian woman has been constructed as a victim of oppressive practices, under patriarchal control. *Secondly*, through the process of migration, the South Asian woman has been classed as a dependant and as an 'obstacle' to assimilation (Rattansi, 1994:68). *Thirdly*, as a consequence of western feminism, the Asian woman has been categorized as a victim who is awaiting rescue and freedom. Racialization has become entrenched in power structures and nowhere is it more evident than in the British state's dealing of issues related to the positioning of South Asian women as dependants (Brah, 1992b; Mama, 1992; Parmar, 1982). Their involvement in opposition to direct intervention by the state in their personal lives, through immigration and nationality legislation, social and welfare policies and practices demonstrate South Asian women's political consciousness as an on-going process. On the basis of historical struggles as colonial subjects, South Asian women in British cities can no longer be viewed as 'wide eyed peasant women, finding it difficult to negotiate their way around the big bad metropolis' (Parmar, 1982).

My aim is to explore the ways and mechanisms through which the 'South Asian woman' as a subject comes into being and 'speaks'. Thus the role of agency and its links to the processes of identity construction and understanding subjectivity will be examined. I will argue that the subject (South Asian woman) is both 'constituted' and 'constituting' and that structure can be both 'enabling'

and 'constraining'.

To begin this chapter, I will first look at how social theory and how, in particular western feminist theory, dealt with 'anomalies' such as the activity of South Asian women. In subsequent sections, I outline the ways in which issues of experience, agency, identity, subjectivity and 'difference' have been understood. The possibilities of applying these in practice will be demonstrated through the narratives of the women interviewed. In the final section I will examine the relationship between gender and agency

### **Connecting Theory and Agency**

Regarded as one of the major contributions to the decentring of the subject (Hall, 1992a) feminist theory has been quick to recognize the insights that a poststructuralist approach brings to the identity construction of women (see Chapter Two). The idea of the subject and subjectivity is central to poststructuralist theory whereby subjectivity is contradictory, always in motion, always being reconstituted, multiple and dynamic (Weedon, 1997). It is an understanding of internal processes of how we are constructed, alongside the diversity of social divisions and how they coalesce in space and time, and operate in different contexts. This is a more complex understanding of different subjective experiences and identities which is indicative of the way in which resistance and agency has been reformulated and put forward by black feminists (Brah, 1992a; Mani, 1992; Mohanty, 1991a). The influence of poststructuralist theory is evident in black feminist thought whereby subjectivity is shown to be socially and historically constructed (Sudbury, 1998; Mama, 1995).



Poststructuralist feminism claims to be anti-essentialist and argues against notions of universalism by putting forward the idea of discursive constructions, for example, with reference to various forms of femininity and masculinity (Weedon, 1997). The question about agency is, if identities are discursive constructions or produced by disciplinary practices (Foucault, 1977) and if they are fractured and fluid, what can be said about agency and the potential to enact social change? If we accept Foucault's ideas on discipline, power and discourse, i.e. subjects are discursive constructions and products of power, we need to ask further questions. Two questions of importance relate to how people are able to resist power and why they take up positions in certain discourses. A major concern for western feminists has been with Foucault's idea of the 'docile body', in which people become the effect of a discourse which consequently denies them agency. The problem of how individuals can use particular discourses to resist or to act has also received comment (Hall, 1996; Giddens, 1984). Moreover, the question for me is this: why are certain discourses more appealing than others to subjects – which processes lead people to act on the basis of particular discourses?

Discourses are not merely abstract ideas, they are powerful in that they highlight power relations between people. In other words, they provide knowledge of 'Others' and are linked to social practices and social structures. Despite the powerful nature of discourses, it does not follow that they cannot be challenged by human agency. Critics of the notion of discourses have put forward the idea that people are capable of exercising agency. For example, Giddens (1984), in his conceptualization of agency in 'structuration theory', represents subjects as 'knowledgeable agents' whereby the active and



knowledgeable agent plays a role in the production and reproduction of the social structure.

Structuration theory draws on the notion of 'duality of structure' and asserts that individuals are both constrained and enabled by structure - a symbiotic relationship between structure and action exists. Thus, because humans do not exist outside the social structure, they create meanings and reality from within their social settings (Giddens, 1984). Viewed from this perspective, agency forms the basis of what is possible through human action. This is particularly important with reference to both political engagement based on identity and also the possibility of social change. My concern, here, is with issues of identity and the changes that can be made in society and the ways in which diasporic identities can be claimed in organized political activity. Thus, if South Asian women are able to make changes in society then they could be presented as 'knowledgeable agents'. Pardeep explained the importance of being in a black women's group and her reasons for being involved in an Asian women's project:

*'With the issues of racism and sexism, I found one of the most powerful things for me as when I started to meet as a group, as a black women's group. I felt the confidence I had in a supportive black women's group. It was brilliant because they could understand about the racist aspects. Now I am working in an Asian women's project, we have been accused of being separatist. I think black women need to be amongst other black women in order for them to strengthen and grow. It's really important because we get judged in society all the time.'*

(Pardeep, Asian Women's Project)

Pardeep indicates that racist and sexist discourses have provided her with the catalyst to become involved in women's groups. Her actions could be

interpreted through 'structuration theory' as being enabled. However, the very fact of mentioning racism and sexism emphasizes structural constraint. In presenting humans as knowledgeable and active subjects structuration theory has proved to be persuasive as it also marks a divergence from the Marxist notion of the determining nature of structural forces.

However, Giddens' (1984) structuration theory has been criticized for conflating structure and agency and with the prioritizing of *agency over structure* (Archer, 1995; Callinicos, 1989). Callinicos argues that the role of structure in shaping human behaviour cannot be denied. His critique states that Giddens puts forward an explanation that is based on interpretive sociology, whereby social relations can be affected and reproduced by intentional human activity. Callinicos concedes that although Marxism has proved to be an inadequate intellectual framework, exemplified through autonomous social movements such as feminism, his emphasis on 'structure' would be in opposition to that of Giddens. Despite the claim that structuration theory has moved beyond the 'subject-object dichotomy', it does, according to Callinicos, revert back to it. This is particularly apparent in terms of 'actors' being constituting and constituted, thus the agent and structure are separate. The main point of contention is however, that although there can be 'knowledgeable agents', they are theorized as ahistorical. These 'knowledgeable agents' do not have any recourse to historically specific conditions, which could lead oppressed groups into organized resistance. In contrast to this approach, one of the women in my research, Rani, demonstrated that her work is political and related it to specific campaigns and policy issues:

*'It [my work] is political in the sense that you get involved with the politics as much as you want to and what I see our work developing into is being more*



*political in terms of the women's movement, making sure that legislation and policy reflect what women need, for example equal opportunities. A lot of that is going to come in terms of the campaign role and I see it as political. I suppose not in the national sense so much now although it has been, for example the Kiranjit Aluwalia case. We had hundreds of signatures supporting that campaign which was started by Southall Black Sisters. We got involved because we felt strongly about it. We also got involved in the campaign led by Women Against Rape, rape in marriage. It was wonderful to get involved in that and educating local women as well because they thought it [rape in marriage] was normal. So I think in that sense we've been involved in politics. On a local level, from the moment you are involved, you are affecting [social] change. It is political because it is standing up for your rights.'*

(Rani, Asian Women's Centre)

It is precisely the fact that South Asian women have been politicized in historically specific conditions (Chapter Three) that paves the way for organized political resistance. Through politicized strategic positioning of ethnic identities such as 'Asian' and 'black', South Asian women have shown to be able to resist structural constraints *and* challenge powerful racist and sexist discourses. Action therefore can work against these discourses by identifying the links to both social practices and social policy. South Asian women can be positioned as historicized, knowledgeable and active but without structuration theory's prioritizing of agency over structure or Callinicos' prioritizing of structure over agency. For that reason, the next section examines specifically women's agency and how it has been conceptualized within feminist theory. In relation to 'race' ideas of identity, subjectivity and difference will be explored and their relevance to South Asian women's agency.

### **Identity, Subjectivity and 'Difference'**

Feminist thought in its fight against male oppression has viewed agency as the capacity to make the change, with the prioritization of social change and equality. Feminists have made claims firstly, that agency was not attributed to

femaleness except negatively to revile the desiring female subject. Dominant institutions constructed women as passive thereby effectively denying them political agency. There are many different feminist approaches to the role of political agency (Phillips, 1992; Haraway, 1990) and without rehearsing these here, a thread common to all of them is the importance of agency for the project of assimilating women as full subjects.

I use agency to consider the insights that poststructuralist feminist theory offers in our understanding of the discursive subject. This is not as a metanarrative but in recognition of its contribution to understanding the identity and subjectivity of South Asian women. I also want to argue that both essentialism and social constructionism form part of the continuum along which we can understand subject positioning in a broader or more international sense. This is similar to Mouffe's articulation of 'partial fixations' of identity within a 'dialectics of nonfixity/fixity' (Mouffe, 1992). As mentioned in Chapter Two, the critiques of unitary identity within feminism with the rejection of the 'universal woman' and essentialism has shifted the focus to multiple, fragmented and decentred subjectivities and subject positions. The recognition of an 'Othered' identity has always had a role to play in various forms of oppression, whether it is patriarchal (Ussher, 1991; de Beauvoir, 1949) or racial (Said, 1978). Oppression has also been constructed in relation to different forms of Otherness – class and sexuality, resulting in the construction of binaries such as man/woman, white/black or straight/gay. At times the implication has been that a hierarchy of oppressions exist. Such conceptualizations carry heavy essentializing notions of each category with an understanding of the two sides of the binary as oppositional. Although the charge of relativism has been



levelled against the deconstruction of such concepts, feminists from different theoretical positions argue that it is possible to reconcile approaches generally considered to be polarized.

Within feminist theoretical perspectives, the ideas of identity and subjectivity have gained increasing prominence, and have shown to be closely connected and culturally contingent. The complexity of identity construction is demonstrated through it being considered, personal and social, and as a marker of difference (Brah, 1992a). Binary understandings of identity such as man/woman and white/black invoke difference, but in our acceptance of difference, it is possible to find commonality with others. This commonality can be evidenced through 'race', culture or class for example when individuals or groups convene around a marker of 'race', culture or class. In the past it has helped in the understanding of oppressions with identity expressed as absolute, as an 'essence of the self'. This type of identity construction is based on the unified and centred Cartesian subject who has an essential inner core (Stoothoff and Murdoch, 1984). The subject presented in this way suggests that a person would have the capability of organization, rational thought, choice and action. However, it ignores the role of cultural mediation that occurs, whereby individuals interact with the outside world in the construction of their identity and adjust to conformity. Stuart Hall comments on identity and identifications:

The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self'. Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. If we feel that we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative of the

self' about ourselves.

(Hall, 1992a: 277)

The tension between a conceptualization of 'identity' and difference as fixed and immutable or one which conceives them as fluid, multiple and constituted can, however, be restated in the context of my discussion about the political agency of South Asian women. Thus, I ask at what times and in what circumstances do South Asian women seek to 'fix' or stabilize a particular identity and how does this 'identity fixing' work as an effect of a particular political objective. The commonalities and partial fixation of identity was evident in the narratives of the women in my research. One woman, Sofia was working for an Asian women's project and involved in campaign work for both this organization and a racial monitoring project which included black (African-Caribbean and Asian) women and men. She told me:

*'I was involved in high profile campaigns such as the Kiranjit Aluwalia and Bandana Patel campaigns. So I was really active in pickets and marches. The other thing I recently got involved with is the new monitoring project which is really political. They work with people who have suffered racial harassment and police brutality. It's quite an interesting organization but it's also demanding. To be on the management committee would be like having a second job because the organization has expanded.'*

(Sofia, Asian Women's Project)

Sofia fixed her identity as 'Asian' when she worked for the Asian women's project and as 'black' when she was involved in the monitoring project. It presents a type of identity construction that is changing and one that moves beyond essentialism and identity based on the premise of binary opposites. Changing forms of identity and the impact of discourses on agency will be taken up in the next section.



## **Discourses, Identity and Agency**

The historically constructed nature of South Asian women's identities, through the process of 'Othering' was explored in Chapter Three. This chapter picks up the debate on women's agency as postcolonial subjects through an investigation into feminist contributions. In this section, I will examine western feminist responses to the issue of 'race' and the inclusion of Third World women in its theoretical output. In fact the two categories 'western feminism' and 'third world feminism' cannot be regarded as singular entities due to the changing meanings of feminism as a concept, the long-standing connections between 'the west' and the 'third world', and their 'internally conflictual histories' (Mohanty, 1991a:4). However, as Mohanty (1991a) argues the terms need to be retained for analytical purposes because they help to illuminate how women have resisted oppressive practices, whilst recognizing fractures and differences within and amongst the two groups. As noted in Chapter Two, Mohanty also raises the ideas of 'imagined community' and 'horizontal comradeship' (Anderson, 1983:15) because they allow for the possibility of coalitions and alliances between women from the west and the third world.

The past decade or two has witnessed the complexity of meanings attached to feminism and to the central tenets of such a theoretical perspective, for example, in the deconstruction of categories such as 'woman'. To investigate some of the ways in which women draw on history I will be using a feminist theoretical perspective. This will illustrate how South Asian women negotiate between essentialized and collective identities, and subjective experiences as postcolonial subjects. With this in mind, we can take as one of the starting points, the questions posed regarding the role of 'race', and agency within the

feminist project.

Within feminist theory if concepts such as 'woman' and 'subject' are problematic, what can be said about the agency of South Asian women? And if western women have made themselves visible through mainstream feminism, what can we say about the (in)visibility of South Asian women who feel the effects of racism? One interviewee replied:

*'I think [I am] invisible in so much as you know [white] people not appreciating that I have a unique personality or a unique character and they just see me as an Asian woman. When I say I'm working for the [Antiracism Organization] and that I'm quite interested in politics, and that I'm doing my masters and that I have opinions on things. That I appreciate literature, I enjoy going to the cinema and I can discuss a work of art quite competently. I mean I may not be saying much but I sense people being quite surprised and I find it quite insulting, because I think, "what did you expect?". I find it also quite sort of curious, I actually want to know what they expected, you know, how people perceive me when they see me sort of outside.'*

(Zora, Antiracism Organization)

Zora's experiences exemplify the expected invisibility of South Asian women. It is based on stereotyping whereby the Asian woman is positioned as without individuality in society (G.Lewis, 2000; Parmar, 1982). Asian women are either invisible; or, if they are visible, they are regarded as blank scripts to be written on; or, as victims who need to be rescued from some terrible fate. How do discourses operate to have such control over people's identity and subjectivity? As forms of knowledge, discourses are powerful because they are made available and can be appropriated by those who are in power. We only have to turn to contradictory discourses that were prevalent in the past, in colonial India, to illustrate this point. Colonized people were relegated to positions of



subjugation in part, through the 'Othering' process, thus discourses of Indians, as described in Chapter Three depicted women as helpless victims. Historically discourses have been used to represent people, with some still holding currency today, for example, the image of the South Asian woman today is no different. Jahanara, a woman working in the field of education and training, told me about the perceptions of South Asian women by the tutors:

*'I'm meeting with tutors themselves and seeing Asian women talking about certain issues breaks down his or her perception of what they thought what Asian women are like. The training we offer is vocational, it's geared towards obtaining skills but we also do job preparation and confidence building, training sessions and workshops on how to be more assertive.'*  
(Jahanara, Employment and Training Project)

Jahanara's efforts to encourage South Asian women to attend classes and to become assertive about their needs extended to outreach work. She was also a member of the management committee of a Bangladeshi women's organization. Jahanara's work for this organization illustrates that some women accept disempowering discourses of acceptable femininity and behaviour. The Bangladeshi women failed to see the value of education and training. Unable to continue due to lack of development, Jahanara resigned from this group and continued with the training programme to promote a better understanding of South Asian women's needs. She also felt that due to stereotyping, some women became more reluctant to attend classes. On the stereotyping of Asian women for example the Government White Paper 'Secure Borders, Safe Havens' (Home Office, 2002) reproduces such discourses in its discussion of forced marriages. The participants in the research demonstrated an awareness of discourses that position them negatively. Zora verifies this but it also takes on and contradicts the whole edifice:

*'I find it sad that there are people that have to think about my colour and can't see beyond that. By doing so, they have certain expectations about the way that I'm going to behave.'*  
(Zora, Antiracism Organization)

The perceptions of the 'visible' South Asian woman are based on stereotyping and powerful yet contradictory discourses. This is captured by Ali Rattansi when he notes:

I have remarked elsewhere on the ambivalence around the figure of the British Asian woman, at once the guardian and pillar of the 'tightly knit' Asian family – much admired, especially by the right, for its 'family values' and discipline – but also as a symbol of Asian 'backwardness'. She is seen as subject to extraordinary subordination and, by her adherence to Asian conventions, is regarded as an obstacle to the assimilation of Asians into British culture, or 'the English way of life'; she is also considered sexually alluring, the dusky heiress to the Kama Sutra and the Oriental harem.

(Rattansi, 1994:68).

The contradictions highlighted in this statement are a reflection of the ways in which discourses are used to construct South Asian women in British society. The discourse of the 'ideal wife' positions her within the family (victim status) and the discourse of 'backwardness' positions her as 'unassimilable' (obstacle status), simultaneously she is regarded as sexually dangerous. This picture of the Asian woman echoes the sexualized discourse of the Oriental woman as submissive yet threatening in her 'unbounded sexuality' (Said, 1978:187). As a result of these negative portrayals, discourses are able to present Asian women in profoundly contradictory ways as a victim, as an obstacle (cultural argument), or as fascination matched by repulsion (Brah, 1992b; Parmar, 1982). Although these subject positions can be powerful they can also 'fail' or be partial because South Asian women can move from discourse as subjugation to the potential for



positive and empowering identifications and agency. The first step towards this is a realization that there is inequality and the basis of this can be 'race', gender or sexuality. Parvati emphasized the importance of this realization in relation to 'race' and gender:

*'Black women, Asian women have to face the 'race' side as well, so it's like double discrimination for them.'*

(Parvati, Asian Women's Project)

Given Parvati's concern about the compounding effects of racism and sexism, the next stage is the role of human agency and its potential to enact social change. Although discourses can be powerful humans cannot be regarded only as the products of discourses. In this case South Asian women are actively involved in the production of alternative discourses and realigned subjectivities. The idea of an active agent who is capable of bringing about change, is considered by Zora:

*'I have an interest in anti-racism by virtue of the fact that I perceive myself to be a young black woman who encounters a number of problems because of the colour of my skin. It just fuelled an interest in how so obviously unjust we were in relation to racism. I felt I wanted to spend slightly more time campaigning on anti-racist issues.'*

(Zora, Antiracism Organization)

Discourses of 'race' are not abstract ideas alone, they are connected to the operation of society, to the structures and practices lived out in society. The injustice prevalent in structures and practices is the reason why discourses which racialize South Asian women need to be challenged. Discourses both define the parameters within which South Asian women are positioned in society and within which they act politically.

Despite such a dynamic of constraint and enabling, the depiction of Asian women through disempowering discourses such as those above, leaves little room for the possibility of bringing about social change through individual or collective action. In fact, the contemporary negative portrayal of Asian women, particularly through the media, still shows Asian women to be victims of patriarchal family systems, deportation or domestic violence. This image has not been rectified by early academic work in this area, particularly earlier anthropological work that was carried out to investigate the lives of Asian women in Britain in which the women are presented as passive (Ballard, 1982, 1979; Saifullah Khan, 1979). It is only when we turn to earlier black feminist writing that we find Asian women depicted as subjects in their own right (Wilson, 1978; Parmar, 1982) and thereby challenging the stereotypical representations. Importantly writers such as Wilson and Parmar draw upon South Asian women's political organizing as the basis of their restitution of full subjecthood to such women. Indeed this connection between activism and subjecthood is echoed in the following statement that includes recognition of discrimination and the ways in which South Asian women have organized themselves:

*'They [white people] claim that they are a just society but they are not, they must understand that. We've got the facilities and all these things but what I see is that we are getting together and fighting racism.'*  
(Rita, Racial Equality Organization)

Rita claims that South Asian women are actively involved in fighting racial inequality despite structural constraints. It is debatable whether structure is 'enabling' or constraining, however, there is evidence that illustrates the ways in



which women negotiate structural constraints, particularly in terms of funding.

As a refuge worker, Sofia was aware of the impact of such constraints:

*'I mean obviously our resources have been geared towards Asian women and when funding was actually put in for this project, there was recognition that services weren't being accessed by Asian women. So there needed to be a space and that's how I see this place, as a space really, where women can draw strength off other women in order for then to tackle issues that confront them within the wider society.'*

(Sofia, Asian Women's Project)

The issues that Sofia is referring to include racial and sex discrimination.

Refuge workers such as Sofia create a space for South Asian women to tackle issues of racial discrimination. However they also have to deal with sex discrimination from South Asian men in their role as local politicians. Kanwal expressed her anger towards these men:

*'A number of the Asian councillors are in key positions. They can be influential. They haven't been born in this country so their mentality is that domestic violence is a community issue. They want to deal with it in the community, which means men will deal with it. They've been absolutely determined to close down the refuge. It's a Labour borough but their mentality, the way that they're thinking is totally backward.'*

(Kanwal, Asian Women's Project)

Kanwal recognized that there are constraints and even acts of sabotage operating. It also demonstrates that common ethnicity does not guarantee that negotiations become easier. This goes against the idea that subjects are 'free' to exercise agency, and that they have the capacity to effect structural change as 'knowledgeable agents'. The narratives demonstrate that South Asian women have been involved in making changes at a micro level in their efforts to resist sexism and state racism. The problem appears to be that differently

positioned 'agents', whether they are knowledgeable or not, have differing degrees of 'freedom' within a structural situation. In addition, the recognition of humans as a collective group, to be involved in forms of resistance, depends to what extent there can be a collective identity. Feminist theory has interrogated this through the concept of 'experience', with some feminists explaining the structural, economic and ideological conditions that lead humans to have a particular experience. South Asian women, in their efforts to gain funding for projects, have to negotiate different constraints dependent on their positioning. In this light, we can now return briefly to the role of experience in feminist thought and its connection to agency.

### **Experience' and Agency**

The different experiences of Asian women will be discussed in the following two chapters focussing on the role of discourses, in particular femininity and masculinity which constructs women as dependants denying them agency. To enable us to understand the role of experience we now turn to Joan Scott's article, "Experience" (1992) in which she investigates how experience has been used as unchangeable evidence by historians (see also Chapter 4, Part One). J.W.Scott states that, through this process, historians:

[They] locate resistance outside its discursive construction and reify agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualising it [...] Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured – about language (or discourse) and history – are left aside.

(J.W.Scott, 1992:25)

Scott's main concern is that if we accept unquestionably experience as a



source of knowledge, we become involved in the reproduction of ideological systems instead of challenging them. Thus, although the 'repressive mechanisms' through which certain groups are rendered invisible, 'women' or 'blacks' or 'Asian' there still remains the contention of how those 'repressive mechanisms' operate to position subjects. For Scott, positioning subjects in discourses of 'race', class, gender, sexuality, and the production of subject experiences is linked through a historical analysis of discourses and discursive practices (Mohanty, 1992; J.W.Scott, 1992). Scott's argument is the recognition of the complexity and changing nature of discursive processes through which one can ascribe, resist or take on an identity. Scott summarizes the link between experience, agency and discourses:

Treating the emergence of a new identity as a discursive event is not to introduce a new form of linguistic determinism, nor to deprive subjects of agency. It is to refuse a separation between "experience" and language and to insist instead on the productive quality of discourse. Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within any of them, multiple meanings possible for concepts they deploy. And subjects have agency. They are not unified autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them [...] Experience is a subject's history.

(J.W.Scott, 1992:34)

We can infer from this that the experiences of Asian women can be individual *and* collective, they do not deny them agency but place emphasis on the ways in which discourses have been influential in constructing subjects and consequently, influencing their experiences and their identities. Throughout history the meanings attached to identities change. Identities are also unstable, for example the identity 'black' has undergone transformations in different

political and historical periods. The next section therefore examines whether the women in my research identified with a political identity 'black' or an ethnic identity 'Asian'.

### **'Political Blackness' or 'Ethnic Asianness'?**

The experiences of different black women in Britain, in the construction of their subjectivity has been recorded by various black writers since the 1970s (Grewal et al., 1988; Bryan et al., 1985; Wilson, 1978). Their work has informed us of contradictions, whilst using 'black' as a political concept, drawing on the shared experiences of colonialism and racism. All this demonstrates is that the concept 'black' is a contested terrain, it tells us nothing about how black women as subjects are constituted as 'different'. An informative approach is one that explores historical discourses that position women as subjects and produces their experiences. Therefore, some black feminists have also commented that the deconstruction of these concepts has created a space for the possibility of resistance to forms of oppression. This is not only through appealing to an essentialized version of identity but uniting on issues such as immigration legislation, a kind of space for the marginalized 'Other'. Indeed if we consider forms of identity, the essentialized identity 'black' has been reformulated and linked to ideas of agency (hooks, 1990). bell hooks writing in the African-American context comments on this reformulation:

The critique of essentialism encouraged by post-modern thought is useful for African-Americans concerned with reformulating outmoded notions of identity. We have too long had imposed on us from both the outside and the inside a narrow constricting notion of blackness. Post-modern critiques of essentialism which challenge the notion of universality and static overdetermined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the



construction of the self and the assertion of agency.

(hooks, 1990:28)

Equally the reformulation of identities and their strategic 'fixing' could be applied to black and Asian women in the British context. Thus, the accounts of women in my research indicate a more fluid approach to the adoption of ethnic identities. In this way it is possible to see the blurring of boundaries and the constant shifting of identities in an attempt to make significant changes to women's lives. This type of identity construction is particularly relevant to diasporic people, in the context of processes that make them invisible, marginal, 'Othered' and discriminated against. The participants identified with a variety of political identities simultaneously. Thus the range of ethnic identifications is exemplified by the following statements, from 'British Asian/Indian' and 'black Asian/Indian', to 'Asian' and 'black'.

*'I see myself as a black Indian woman. Black in the political sense. Indian because I am Indian. That's how I choose to describe myself. There are a lot of similarities to black African Caribbean women. I can identify with them as well in all sorts of ways and it's much easier, I feel more comfortable [with them].'*  
(Pardeep, Asian Women's Project)

*'One day, I don't know if it would materialize, [I would like] to save enough to live on and go back and settle in India. So I'm British Asian in essence.'*  
(Rekha, Asian Women's Advisory Project)

*'I perceive myself to be a young black woman who encounters a number of problems because of the colour of my skin. I mean I use black in certain contexts but I perceive myself as British Asian, black Asian even but you know if you expect me not to acknowledge that I'm Asian, I don't think is very good. We were at a black student conference and I was speaking to a friend of mine and I said something to the effect of black and Asian students, and he said, "no, you're all black". I said, "don't try to define who I am and don't try to impose terminologies and expect me to use them." I'm not comfortable with those terms.'*

(Zora, Antiracism Organization)

*'In this society as a whole I'm black but at the same time I'm Asian because I've got a different culture.'* (Parvati, Asian Women's Project)

*'I suppose that I'm a British Indian because as far as I'm concerned, I'm as British as anyone else, you know who was born in this country.'*

(Kanwal, Asian Women's Project)

*'Black means Afro-Caribbean but not Asian.'*

(Sonya, Asian Women's Project)

The above process of identity construction represents an 'unsettled space between a number of intersecting discourses' (Hall, 1991:10). This method of conceptualizing identity moves it away from the notion of static to dynamic, as a contextual characteristic of relationships embedded in power whether social, economic or political. The women were involved in a negotiation of positionalities – they negotiated identities within the parameters of political spaces which in part they constructed through the very practices of negotiation. They identified themselves in different ways according to their circumstances. Through the process of negotiation this type of identity construction also distances itself from claims of authenticity, particularly when applied to an understanding of 'the self'. The multiplicity of identity and the contradictions contained within this conceptualization are linked to the idea of agency, for if the concept 'woman' holds different meanings, then it follows that South Asian women's social relationships are constructed within changing power relationships.

The women interviewed used the political identities, 'Asian' and 'black', which were thought to be important in locating the basis for political agency (compare



Sudbury 2001:30). This research attempted to address the question of whether the identity 'Asian' can be used to centre oneself. Where does gender and class position and, of course, the 'black self' fit into all of this? The whole process of identification with any of these political identities exposes the complex reality of identity construction (Hall, 1991). An analysis of the ways in which the political identity 'black' can be retrieved for collective action and the fluidity of this 'black' identity is reflected in Sudbury's research into black women's organizations. She uses the term 'multiracial blackness' in which a number of groups can strategically adopt this identity and avoid homogeneity or essentialism. 'Black' is an identity that can be used effectively as one of many identities oppositional to hegemonic forces. In this respect it offers the possibility of building alliances between different groups of women, as exemplified by Southall Black Sisters and in the past, by the Organization of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) (Parmar, 1990).

By specifically setting up Asian women's projects, or working in fields that interact with minority ethnic women, South Asian women are drawing on certain aspects of an ethnic identity or fixing it temporarily. It is a way of drawing on cultural forms to resist racism. While the term 'black' is important in recognizing similarities of experience as a post-colonial subject within a racist society, at the same time, it does not necessarily have to deny or compromise an 'Asian' identity or culture as assumed by Hazareesingh (1986) and Modood (1994). 'Black' as an organizing political concept has and still can represent a political consciousness that resists erasure of other differences (Housee and Dar, 1996). The particular relationship between 'black' and other ethnic identities cannot be predicted prior to any formation, but is something that entails a

continuous process of struggle and negotiation, as can be seen from one of the statements made by the participants. Neesha told me:

*'The criteria used by [this Project] are to serve South Asian women. We have widened the term 'Asian' to include Chinese, Vietnamese, Iraqi and Iranian women who do not have these facilities available to them [...] We didn't want Asian women to go into Women's Aid refuges where they couldn't identify culturally and linguistically.'*

(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

Neesha's organization had moved beyond a fixed identity of 'Asian'. Instead it promoted an open door policy to women who could culturally and linguistically identify with being 'Asian'. It is also clear that the identity 'Asian' had also been extended due to a lack of services available to women from certain ethnic groups. Chantal Mouffe (1992), in her argument against essentialism, proposes the idea of 'articulation' through discourses between different political standpoints - constituting the subject occurs through 'discursive structures' which themselves may be unstable. Although the consequence of this is the lack of a fixed identity or connections to other subject positions, she rejects the idea that this will result in a situation in which the concepts of 'black' or 'woman' cannot be retained. Rather, she argues for the partial fixation of identities through the creation of 'nodal points' (Mouffe, 1992:371). This is something that the women interviewed were doing, both in using identities such as 'black', 'Asian', and 'British Asian', and by extending it to other women.

Some women in the research held definite ideas of what constitutes an Asian woman, therefore they were unable to identify with being 'black'. However they were aware of 'political blackness' and were able to strategically identify with a racialized 'Other'. Although mentioned earlier, this is illustrated in the important



responses from Parminder and Shaheeda:

*'I'm Asian definitely, black doesn't mean anything to me, I feel Asian.'*  
(Parminder, Asian Women's Project)

*'This [black] is what they [white people] call us, I don't know, I mean, I'm not black. I really detest this word when people call me black. I mean they don't call me black in front of me but when they put it on the form in black and white. Sometimes they identify, 'Black', 'Asian' and 'White' but normally when they use the terms black and white, we come under 'Black.'*  
(Shaheeda, Muslim Women's Organization)

Parminder and Shaheeda identify no overlaps between black and Asian identities. Interestingly this perception had not prevented Parminder from working for an organization that identified itself as providing a service for black people. Therefore, even this example illustrates the complexity of identity construction, where strategy, ethnic identity and identification with a racialized 'Other' intersect. Where women use Asianness to mark their difference, we need to consider the importance of culture in the construction of identity. South Asian women, by specifically setting up Asian women's projects or working within a brief for minority ethnic women, are drawing on certain aspects of this ethnic identity or fixing it temporarily. It is a way of drawing on cultural forms to resist racism. Moreover there is a re-definition of Asian femininity occurring alongside the actualization of a 'black' identity. And the claiming of both can be one way of positioning oneself as 'Asian' in contradistinction to stereotypical images and expectations of an Asian woman.

Negative stereotyping is inextricably linked to a broader perspective of power relations. It refers to the power of others to define black women as racialized,

gendered and classed subjects (Collins, 1991). Collins points to the ability of black women to seize the power from another to create negative images and suggests that empowerment can be achieved through 'the power of self definition' (Collins, 1991:30). It also points to a reaffirmation of the role of history, culture and language in the construction of the self (Mama, 1992; Parmar, 1990) and to overcome inequality. The next section explores whether feminism has had a role in the call for equality.

### **'Race', Feminism and South Asian Women's Agency**

If South Asian women have taken action to overcome racial inequality why is agency still thought of as a masculine activity? What constitutes agency, how it is invoked and whether all humans can participate in it is a debated issue. On the question of whether agency is a masculine activity, bell hooks states:

let's talk about why we see the struggle to assert agency – that is the ability to act in one's own interest – as a male thing.

(hooks, 1990:206).

Conceptualizing agency as masculine contradicts the involvement of black women in political struggles. Similarly, Julia Sudbury (1998) notes that in the masculinist discourse of 'race' (Goulbourne, 1990; Anwar, 1986), women's agency does not feature. She is also critical of the use of stereotyping in the analysis of agency, which she states 'does nothing to unravel the complexities of racialized sexism' (Sudbury, 1998:53). This is similar to the point made by Omi and Winant (1986) and referenced earlier in the chapter, regarding mythification and stereotyping, through which meanings are attached to the concept 'race'. In addition, although agency is considered to be a central



feature of the feminist agenda, it has been given slow recognition by feminists (McNay, 2000; Sudbury, 1998; Mohanty, 1991a). The concept of political agency is central to the questions around identity - can women act in their own interests and is feminism a contributory factor?

The concept of feminism, raised suspicions amongst some of the women interviewed, despite adhering to many principles commonly associated with the 'rights of women'. The women preferred to say that they were not outright feminists or that they were 'womanist' (Walker, 1984). Alice Walker coined the term 'womanist' in order to distinguish it from the term 'feminist' which she viewed as being appropriated by 'white' women. Racism and sexism inform the 'womanist' identity and this is captured in the following statement:

*'I think there's some element of influence because I've worked with women for sixteen, eighteen years. I've worked with very strong feminist organizations. We were known for our campaigning work for promoting women's rights but I personally don't define myself as a feminist. I would define myself as a womanist. Being a woman I have mixed feelings about defining myself as a feminist. I agree with sixty or seventy per cent of the issues but a lot of the things I don't agree with. Feminism is often labelled within the Asian community as something negative and I feel that being a woman doesn't mean being a womanist or a feminist, it doesn't mean putting down men. It's about making our rights known, being assertive and looking for equality.'*

(Rekha, Asian Women's Advisory Project)

'Womanism' is a concept that has been utilized by black women and is evident in Sudbury's study of women's organizations (1998). Most of the women emphasized equality and rights, with some of them claiming feminism as a way of gaining rights, although the statements above and below show that women also feel that they have to justify this claim:

*'I'm not a feminist to the extreme but I am a woman's rights worker. If there is a word that describes a womanist or something, I am that because I still think it's very [pause] I mean I didn't see myself going in that direction. I couldn't and I can't see my community or the women and the children from the community doing it either.'*

(Vijay, Asian Women's Project)

*'As a feminist I am not saying that women are better, or men are worse or whatever. What I am saying is we want equality basically.'*

(Parvati, Asian Women's Project)

*'Okay, feminism, campaigning for women's rights, to be allowed to have equal opportunities and recognition in this society. I'm all for that but I've never really considered myself as a feminist. I've just considered myself as me, an individual, this is what I'm doing, this is my thing, I don't want to label myself.'*

(Kanwal, Asian Women's Project)

Vijay's states that a womanist identity is preferable to the label 'feminism'. She also does not see feminism as an identity that the South Asian community would adopt easily. Parvati and Kanwal recognized the importance of equality with men in connection to their rights as Asian women. Although their agency is informed through feminism the women expressed ambivalence to the adoption of a full feminist identity. Their identities are based on being Asian and in this context we could consider them to be 'partial' feminists. South Asian women's identification with an ethnic identity such as 'Asian', can be viewed as using an essentialized identity. However, they used 'Asian' to construct their agency. Their purpose is not to interrogate what it means to be a woman but to demand equality. Or to put it another way, women's rights and equality is the subject of all three participants' political aims, but ethnic identity is the position from which they seek to achieve their objectives. It is ethnic identity that comes to the fore in the narratives of their agency as shown below by women working in Asian women's projects:



*'There aren't enough Asian women's centres that really understand. I would have valued an Asian women's centre when I was growing up.'*

(Pardeep, Asian Women's Project)

*'We accept women of South Asian origin from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This would also include women of South Asian origin from Africa, Mauritius and so on.'*

(Zainab, Asian Women's Project)

*'Although it's supposed to be an Asian women's refuge, we do take other women but we don't take white women. [The Project] has widened its term Asian to include Chinese, Vietnamese, Iraqi and Iranian women who do not have these facilities available to them.'*

(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

The use of essentialized identities is precisely an illustration of the construction of a certain womanhood in discursive practices. South Asian women are able to establish boundaries to 'white' feminism by rejecting the belief that women's equality can be achieved within a multicultural paradigm. This is something that will be considered in the next chapter which looks at sexism. The right to assert difference runs counter to the dilemma Chantal Mouffe poses regarding the search for equality:

If the category "woman" does not correspond to any unified and unifying essence, the question can no longer be to try to unearth it. The central issues become: how is "woman" constructed as a category within different discourses? [...] To ask if women should become identical to men in order to be recognized as equal or if they should assert their difference at the cost of equality, appears meaningless once essential identities are put into question.

(Mouffe, 1992: 373)

One response to Mouffe's dilemma concerns the question of rights and inequality. Participants in this study also made comments that spoke to the relation between rights, politics and feminism:

*'I'm quite confused as to what feminism is but we fight for the basic rights of women because women are denied their rights.'*

(Vijay, Asian Women's Project)

*'I see our work developing into being more political in terms of the women's movement.'*

(Rani, Asian Women's Centre)

*'It's political in the sense that we are saying that women have the right to an independent existence and this is a denial of those rights.'*

(Zainab, Asian Women's Project)

*'I don't know what feminist thinking is really. I think I'm a mixture of both because I don't want to leave the [Asian] tradition and I don't want to become an extreme feminist, I like the family atmosphere. [But I know that] women are denied their rights.'*

(Parvati, Asian Women's Project)

The above statements are included to highlight that some women see themselves as politicized, others do not, however while they use 'rights' language their connections to and understanding of feminism are presented more ambiguously. The deconstruction of concepts that have been at the heart of feminism has caused anxiety over whether they will be dismissed from the feminist vocabulary. In response to this, Judith Butler proposes the use of 'multiple significations' in feminist theory, which would expand the identity of 'woman'. It would not only encapsulate differences, but would also promote an informed understanding of agency, including recognition that the concept can

also be utilized in non-feminist ways. The participants are non-feminist to the extent that firstly, a certain constituency can claim the label 'feminist'. Secondly, that the women establish a distance between themselves and what they see as feminists. These are significant points in connection with the development of 'black feminism', and in connection with religious identities, which are not necessarily, at first glance, feminist in their aims.

Butler's idea of 'multiple significations' (1992) can inform us of difference, of formerly invisible black women, in this thesis, the difference is 'being South Asian'. The intention is not to present Asian women as a homogeneous group, as there are obvious difficulties with this approach. The difficulty lies in the fact that if the identity 'Asian' is seen as an ontologically pre-given category, then the category can be 'known' via a set of assumed characteristics. However, I am looking at how a category 'South Asian woman' is brought into being and momentarily 'fixed' as a contingent and on-going identity through engagements with feminism and community based activism. Boundaries based on religion, caste and class demonstrate the heterogeneous nature of the category 'South Asian woman' and the need to critically review current literature which often implies that the experiences of South Asian women are homogenous (but see Sudbury 1998; Bhopal 1997; Puar 1996; Brah, 1994; Bhachu 1988; Westwood and Bhachu 1988). There is also a need to recognize the extent to which South Asian feminist political coalitions are cut across by the boundaries of class, caste, religion, and 'race'. Thus, although the women interviewed occupied a variety of political positions, it is important to emphasize the commonalities in the space they occupy. Brah (1996) outlines some of the ways in which these commonalities are developed through networking amongst organizations:



The organizing activities of Asian women take a variety of forms [...] Whatever their political perspective, these groups seek to develop support networks for one another, organize social and cultural activities, provide information and advice (for example on immigration, law and social welfare) and offer space to women to organize and campaign on issues they see as relevant.

(Brah, 1996:82)

Through campaigning for 'victims' of domestic violence, the visibility of such organizations counter the dominant discourses of Asian women such as the reproduction of 'woman as victim' or lacking agency. In addition, for some, participation in projects provides a space for self-expression outside confining frameworks and a place to communicate with other women with whom they can foster a collective identity. It can also foster a sense of empowerment through an 'enabling' role, although working within projects can also be a source of tension in relation to, for example, religious identities - this will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

### **Reclaiming the 'Asian' Identity**

This research is not concerned with the work of Asian women's projects specifically, rather it is what the projects can tell us about the agency of South Asian women. However, the political significance of such organizations cannot be overlooked, particularly as focal points for organized activities such as those against deportations, unnecessary medical examinations, racist immigration policies and domestic violence. These issues concern state racism but sometimes, the projects in whichever capacity, can also be regarded as a space for women to come together. Julia Sudbury's study demonstrates how black women's organizations provide the possibility of exercising political



agency. Thus women are shown to be involved in political activities and forms of resistance, with the ability to bring about social change. On the issue of political agency and the nature of such organizations Sudbury comments:

As my research will show, black women's organizations are not fixed in time, but change and are constantly reborn over time [...] Black women's autonomous spaces offer fertile ground for the examination of the intersection of economic, ideological and political structures, forces and counterforces in Britain. Yet these organizations have been largely ignored by sociologists and historians alike.

(Sudbury, 1998:13).

The narratives of South Asian women in this study have shown that they have constructed an essentialized 'Asian' ethnic identity to set up projects. The women have created a 'narrative of the self' (Hall, 1992a:277) for identity based on ethnicity and gender. Recognizing the contradictions in identity construction allows for an understanding that takes into account the creative ways in which humans move between different conceptualizations of identity. Thus, the idea of an essentialized identity (collective) could be used to allow the formation of political alliances, whereas fragmentary notions of identity (personal) allows for the contradictory and shifting forms of identity. Through the women's narratives, it is the idea of continuum that can provide the conceptual framework for linking the individual and agency to the context of structural processes. This is preferable to the conceptualization of identities either as discrete opposites or as fragmented. This type of conceptualization allows for an understanding of the positioning of South Asian women as racialized postcolonial subjects, both as 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (Brah, 1996), and their identities as 'partial fixations' (Mouffe 1992: 371).

Although it is easier to understand oppression in terms of binaries (Hall, 1997), the idea of the continuum argues that although a group can be oppressed in many ways, through the intersections of 'race', gender, class and sexuality, the role of discourses and the discursive construction of the subject cannot be overlooked (Mama, 1995). It allows for the differences within group that are not apparent in essentialized notions of concepts such as 'black' or 'Asian'. Essentialized notions of identity place groups in opposition to each other, through the drawing of rigid lines between ethnic and racial groups. The problem arises when the philosophy of separatism uses difference as a marker, not only as a defence against racism but also to safeguard supremacist values (Gilroy, 1987). Although South Asian women have been shown to be active agents within constraints, how agency has been conceptualized remains a hotly debated issue in social theory. The next section therefore examines the contributions by feminist writers in understanding the relationship between agency and gender.

### **The Relationship between Gender and Agency**

The question of agency and gender identity is fraught with difficulties, particularly for feminist theory. In *Gender and Agency*, Lois McNay critiques feminist conceptualizations of agency, arguing that it has provided only a partial account for action. The main aspect of her work contends that it is set in a negative paradigm of subject formation. Subject formation is placed in a dialectic of freedom and constraint, thus, 'the subject [is] formed from an originary act of constraint' (McNay, 2000:2). She proposes contextualizing agency within power relations as a way of understanding acts of resistance in the face of constricting social sanctions. The idea of a dialectic of stasis and



change would appear to be more appropriate when considering the ways in which South Asian women are involved in acts of resistance or social change. Her work offers a broad and varied conception of agency and explains how women are motivated to take action and the form that these actions take. It would also prevent accusations being levelled at black women multiple interlocutors for their participation in such 'acts of resistance', i.e. the 'triple jeopardy' experience articulated by Trinh:

Triple jeopardy means here that whenever a woman of color takes up the feminist fight, she immediately qualifies for three possible "betrayals": she can be accused of betraying either man (the "manhater"), or her community ("people of color should stay together to fight racism"), or woman herself ("you should fight first on the women's side"). The pitting of anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles against one another allows some vocal fighters to dismiss blatantly the existence of either racism or sexism within their lines of action, as if oppression only comes in separate, monolithic forms.

(Trinh, 1989:104).

South Asian women's agency against racial and sexist oppression implies an agent or subject. On the question of the 'subject' and 'agency', Judith Butler asks the following questions:

Do we need to assume theoretically from the start a subject with agency before we can articulate the terms of a significant social and political task of transformation, resistance and democratization? If we do not offer in advance the theoretical guarantee of that agent are we doomed to give up transformation and meaningful political practice?

(Butler, 1992:13)

Butler argues that the female subject is constituted through processes of 'exclusion', 'differentiation' and 'repression', which are obscured through illusory

notions of autonomy. These processes serve to position women as the subordinate Other, rendering them invisible. This is applicable to black women within the political project of feminism, as experiences of the past demonstrate. The claim of 'universal woman' and oppression, as used by mainstream (white) feminists, made them visible, but resulted in the exclusion of black women. In turn the invisibility of black women on the feminist agenda led to the questioning of the 'universal woman', the outcome being further fractionalization within the feminist movement. If such fractionalization has occurred, and if concepts such as 'woman' and 'black' have been deconstructed, we need to ask the question, what does it mean to be a woman and can there be some commonalities that women can organize around? I have demonstrated in this chapter that South Asian women call on commonalities based on the intersection of ethnicity, 'race' and gender. Although it is difficult to separate the commonalities the following two chapters investigate how South Asian women have resisted oppressive practices through organizing on the basis of gender and religion. On the commonalities that women use to organize around, Donna Haraway comments:

There is nothing about 'being' a female that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constituted in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, 'race' or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism.

(Haraway, 1989:179)

Thus due to their experiences of racism and patriarchy South Asian women have organized to resist and empower themselves against the operation of powerful discourses in society.



## Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the racialization of South Asian women and how discourses with colonial roots have been powerful in relegating them to object positions, despite a history of involvement in political movements. It has shown how a political consciousness has not been 'acquired' due to their arrival in British cities. The narratives of the women interviewed show, firstly, the impact of 'race' and disempowering racialized discourses on the politicization process; and, secondly, how women have become politicized despite political agency theorized and viewed in practice as a masculine activity.

I have demonstrated how South Asian women are able to exercise agency within constraints. Through the political project of feminism, this chapter has been able to show firstly, the discursive construction of the self, with all its contradictions, including those related to the retention of essentialized ethnic and racial identities. Secondly, it has been able to outline how agency has been theoretically conceptualized in social theory and feminist theory. Despite the exclusionary nature of feminist politics, I have suggested that feminism has a role to play in South Asian women's agency. Contrary to women's narratives denying feminism as an identity or identification, I have also argued that South Asian women's political agendas feature the feminist language of 'rights' and 'equality'. This feminist language is compromised when used in right wing activity which was demonstrated in Chapter Three, through the ability of the Hindutva movement to politically mobilize Hindu women in India's communal politics.

I have also argued that South Asian women's political agency can be explained

by drawing on developments in feminist theory which have interrogated the concept 'woman', and have utilized poststructuralist notions of 'multiple significations' or 'partial fixation of identities', whilst retaining the need for coalitions based on essentialized forms of identity (Butler, 1992; Mouffe, 1992). Through a historicization of South Asian women's political agency, the chapter has developed the idea that essentialized forms of identity need to be retained.

Although the shift from essentializing notions of identity to poststructuralist ideas of conflicting and contradictory identities has proved to be helpful, it has also posed problems. Firstly, the emphasis on plurality and diversity has generated individual 'identity politics' and as some writers have claimed, the erasure of 'race' (Mohanty, 1992). The implication is that there is a continued existence of 'universal oppression', something which does not recognize class and 'race' differences. The role of history, as indicated above, is important but, as pointed out by black feminists, the omission of experience and political agency in the equation would be an oversight. Thus Mohanty suggests that, 'historicizing and locating political agency is a necessary alternative to formulations of the 'universality' of gendered oppressions and struggles' (Mohanty 1992: 75).

Women's narratives demonstrate how they are able to draw on cultural identifications of 'Asianness' and political identifications of 'blackness'. These have been shown to be fixed temporarily, to resist racism. I have also argued for the idea of a *continuum* which provides a conceptual framework for linking the individual to structural processes. The narratives also offer an insight into experiences and political activism of South Asian women as postcolonial

subjects in British society. The experiences are discussed further in the following chapter which examines the impact of sexism within and outside the 'Asian community'.



## Chapter 6

### 'In the Name of the Father' – Contours of Gender Relations

#### Introduction

The previous chapter explored the ways in which racism is prevalent in South Asian women's lives and the methods employed to resist it. In a similar way, this chapter explores how sexism impacts on the lives of South Asian women. The role of agency is examined throughout the chapter by exploring the relationships between patriarchy and culture *and* interpretations of them by men and women. The link to culture and agency are revealed through examining women's understanding of 'choice' in marriage and sexuality. The first section of this chapter investigates the extent of patriarchal oppression within the Asian community, its link to culture, and how it operates within power relations. The idea of a universal patriarchy is explored through the lens of feminist understanding and its implications for understanding South Asian women's experiences. The aim is not to reinforce stereotypes of the Asian family but to examine how sexism operates against South Asian women in their relationship to the community. Subsequent sections show how the binary of the 'good woman' and the 'bad woman' is constructed with its implications for subjugated identities within marriage and sexuality. I will be drawing on the interview material more strongly to show how it provides an insight into some of the strategies employed by women in challenging oppressive practices and notions of acceptable forms of femininity or behaviour through stereotyping. The women's narratives provide detail about the ways in which South Asian women are actively involved in the process of self-definition and empowerment, through their claim to rights, it also reveals the struggle for power.

## **Patriarchy and Cultural Interpretations**

The role of patriarchal control, the family and 'the community' in South Asian women's lives cannot be underestimated. It is captured in the following statement based on Vijay's experiences of working closely with women fleeing domestic violence:

*'You can live the way you want to as long as you don't break the laws of this country. We've all got a right to do that, to practice our religion, our culture and that's not taken into account, when it comes to all the major decisions in family life.'*

(Vijay, Asian Women's Project)

The role of culture and religion is featured frequently in connection with women's experiences. Although Vijay recognises the need for personal freedom with respect to religion and culture, it is precisely these factors which have prevented some women from participating in family decisions. Neesha expressed the lack of human rights for women within the family unit and society in general:

*'While a girl is growing up, she is never a person in her own right, so the first thing we do is to teach them that they have rights, basic human rights to self respect, to dignity and that they are entitled to protection from their families, and from society.'*

(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

Neesha's role as a refuge worker reveals a familiar feature of her work: human rights abuse against women within the family unit, ranging from domestic violence, forced marriage and denial of education. Protection from the family is provided by refuges, which operate on the basis of providing shelter for women who leave the family unit. The evidence from refuges indicates that some women are prevented from making decisions and from playing an active role in



society. However the relationship that women have with their families remains an ambivalent one, as Avtar Brah comments:

The psychic investment in relationships with family mark the person even as she may challenge patriarchal discourses and practices. Given the power of the emotional bond [...] it is perhaps not surprising that 'family' remains an area of acute ambivalence for women. Moreover, the desire for intimacy and a sense of belonging, as well as the lack of many viable alternatives for the majority of women, means the 'family' remains an important unit of organisation. For Asian women, family support may also become necessary in the struggles against the onslaughts of racism.

(Brah, 1996: 76)

'Patriarchal discourses' as pointed out above, position South Asian women as 'carriers of tradition and culture' (Gillespie, 1995:80; Sudbury, 1998; Brah, 1996). This section therefore looks at the ways in which culture can be used to subordinate women *and* how women have appropriated certain aspects of culture as they craft spaces for the constitution and expression of political agency. The concept 'culture' is often associated with essentialized notions, representing a static understanding of minority ethnic communities. References are made within the South Asian diaspora to 'Asian ethnic pride' (Modood, 1994:869) or a shared culture and history (Hazareesingh, 1986). It is the static version of culture and how it can be used as a control mechanism in women's lives which has been recognised by Parvati:

*'People tend to forget and people tend to ignore what's happening to us [South Asian women], they tend to rely on what happened to us ages ago. It is never the same; it is changing all the time. We have to look at the way we are developing in this country, not back in Pakistan, India or Mauritius, back in whichever other Asian countries, because culture is never static.'*

(Parvati, Asian Women's Project)



Furthermore, Parvati also recognises how the stereotyping of South Asian women can occur through a reliance on knowledge from the past. She suggests that the changing or more fluid nature of culture is more appropriate to understanding South Asian women's experiences. Thus it is the dynamic nature of cultural processes, which need to be recognised, avoiding essentialist constructions. Culture in this way can then be regarded as holding 'different political and cultural meanings in different contexts' (Brah, 1996:98). Despite this, it is often the static understandings of culture, which are frequently used to justify sexist discrimination and the subjugation of South Asian women. Subjugation and discriminatory practices are captured in the bleak statement made by Jaya Kothai Pillai in *Women and Empowerment*, as she sets the scene for an investigation into the status of Indian women:

Even before the girl child is born, parents view her as a liability. This attitude is rooted in a complex set of social, cultural and historical factors. The dowry system and economic dependence of women and social customs and traditions are the main causes of the neglect of the girl child and discrimination against her. As the girl child is viewed as an economic burden and social responsibility, she is unwanted and her arrival is not considered as a joy and discrimination begins immediately after birth, with respect to feeding practices, health and medical care. [...] There is considerable evidence of higher morbidity among girls. [...] It is also found that there is no linkage between the prosperity of a family and the status of the girl child. [...] In the rural areas, about 70% of the non-starters i.e. those who have never been to school are girls.

(Pillai, 1995: 4-5)

Pillai highlights sexist discrimination in various areas of life against women on the Indian subcontinent. Her comments also illustrate the common theme of historical, social and cultural factors in the positioning of South Asian women as

'victim'. Historically (as Chapter Three has shown), despite the victim status assigned to South Asian women, they managed to gain rights and participated in the public arena, in major political movements.

We now turn to the underlying social and cultural factors which contribute to South Asian women being regarded as one of the most oppressed groups in society with patriarchal control often related to oppression by the family and 'the community'. Cultural practices such as arranged and forced marriages, which come to the attention of the public, are viewed as backward or uncivilized in much the same way as *sati* was regarded in colonial India, with men playing the part of the aggressor. Despite this one-dimensional and stereotypical understanding of Asian women, the following is an example of participants' comments on the possibility of challenging the idea of sexism as an unchanging and unchanged cultural practice, within the community and initiating social change:

*'Of course you can imagine in Asian communities, in Asian culture, the way women are taught not to put themselves first, to put other people, the family, the husband, the children [first], and therefore to forget about their existence. Other people matter, but now we are making women understand that they are also human beings and their existence makes a difference to this world. We have to understand how important they are as people and learn to accept them as people. The minute they start doing that, they will understand how important it is to look after themselves, to care for themselves.'*  
(Parvati, Asian Women's Project)

While this statement reiterates the sexist discrimination that a female child can expect from the time of her birth (Pillai, 1995), it also suggests that through her involvement in a women's refuge, Parvati has witnessed how women can be empowered to challenge discrimination within the Asian community and is



drawing on the notion of 'rights' which we saw in the previous chapter, is commonly invoked as an explanation and objective of South Asian women's involvement in political activism. However, empowerment and awareness is not limited to the women, the community's involvement is required to overcome sexist discriminatory practices. As Neesha succinctly put it:

*'We need a change of thinking from the community's part.'*  
(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

Changing attitudes and practices requires awareness raising within South Asian communities and has proved to be a difficult task (P. Patel, 1997). South Asian women's organizations are positioned within 'the community', but have often received a hostile reception on the basis of raising issues of concern to women such as domestic violence and forced marriage. Consequently, there have been attempts to close such organizations on the basis of them contributing to the degeneration of Asian culture. Sofia expresses the attitude of the community:

*'The community, I think that the Asian community in general does not like organisations such as ours because they do feel threatened by it. We are sort of labelled as homewreckers, anything that tears the fabric of the Asian community.'*  
(Sofia, Asian Women's Project)

The fabric of the Asian community referred to, is intimately connected to culture and the associated ideas of shame (*sharam*) and honour (*izzat*) with women as well as men participating in surveillance in order to control especially younger women's sexuality (Siddiqui, 2000; P. Patel, 1997). Thus concerning the questionable role of culture and the role that both women and men play in reproducing ideologies of acceptable feminine behaviour, Neesha comments:



*'Who is making it cultural? It is us and I think that sometimes it is no good blaming men, I think women have to change and unless women change, men will never change. Men have a vested interest in not changing. The mullahs and all different religions don't want things to change. Where in the book of God does it say that women have to be treated the way you have just been treated? It doesn't say it anywhere! A lot of the women who come to the refuge have been to their community leaders, have been to the mullahs, asking for help and they have in response been asked to become good wives, by not provoking their husbands! They are also told that they should not be disintegrating the system and not leave their husbands because they will be unable to marry their daughters to suitable men.'*

(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

Neesha indicates a somewhat conservative aspect of women's agency and reinforces the idea of South Asian women as 'carriers of culture and tradition' (Gillespie, 1995:80) which was also evident in the ways colonial discourses played a significant role in the reproduction of stereotypical images. Although culture and tradition can render women powerful with an affirmation of women's identity (Brah, 1992), it can also work against them. The possibility of change within the South Asian community can be explained partially by using the viewing of Hindi films by young women with their mothers, in comparison to the freedom granted to young men. Although Gillespie's (1995) study is specifically in connection with Punjabis, she makes an important point with reference to social change and communication between different generations of women:

In contrast [to boys], girls are expected to remain at home where strong and supportive female cultures are strengthened by collectively viewing and discussing Hindi films. Female-only viewing sessions which span three or four generations are common. One of the dominant themes of Hindi movies is the 'clash of tradition and modernity' in Indian society, which is normally resolved at the expense of the latter. [...] Films, or young viewers' interpretations of them, which affirm 'modernity' as against 'tradition' provoke discussion with female elders, many of whom, as their children and grandchildren say, 'are living in the India which they left twenty

years ago', and are unwilling to embrace change. In fact many elders in Southall are regarded as having retreated into a cultural conservatism and traditionalism from which their relatives in India, especially in urban centres, have liberated themselves: they are 'more Indian than Indians'.

(Gillespie, 1995: 80)

Despite the possibility of a dialogue between different generations of women, the conceptual limitations of the modernity-tradition dichotomy as a way of thinking about challenges to sexist cultural and social practices is evident. However, discourses of the 'strong and supportive female cultures' (Gillespie, 1995) has been shown to be appropriated and used by women who have attained high levels of education. The participation of these women in the labour market is used as leverage to challenge male power within households. This process represents social change, which does not imply that success can only be attained at the expense of cultural or religious abandonment as suggested by Kalwant Bhopal (1997). Thus women as wage earners with high levels of education are able to construct contradictory identities of belonging, Otherness and difference (Ramji, 2002: 237). On the construction of identities, Hasmita Ramji comments that this process does not lead to the 'inevitable culture clash' syndrome, prevalent in accounts of young South Asian women:

Their [young South Asian women] newly empowered class status is permitting and facilitating a re-negotiation of old gender divisions. However, contrary to the clash of culture thesis, this is not leading to friction between the mothers and the daughters or to an abandonment of cultural traditions, but to a re-definition of these traditions.

(Ramji, 2003: 238)



The culture clash thesis referred to above is maintained if polar opposites are set up. These are tradition and modernity, religious and secular, east and west. It is also reiterates that these binaries discursively position and construct people's identities because they 'are rooted in the history of imperialism and colonialism, and continue to shape people's understanding of the cultural changes in which they participate' (Gillespie, 1995: 206). For South Asian women it has meant the balancing of these configurations. Different women, in different communities have shown that they play an active part in the construction of seemingly contradictory identities. This process poses interesting questions about empowerment, social and political agency. Therefore in the context of the participants in this project, culture was described both in negative and positive ways. It was also used strategically, as an identifier for South Asian women, particularly in the context of firstly, funding for separate women's projects, and, secondly, for the client group. Culture therefore requires a deeper and contextual understanding rather than 'as a bounded, impermeable, monolithic entity' (Gillespie, 1995: 206). Thus through the adoption of an ethnic identity 'Asian' (as shown in Chapter Five), the women in my research were involved in strategic positioning and were simultaneously calling on and rejecting certain aspects of 'Asian culture', as and when required. The recognition of inequality within the 'Asian culture' paradigm and the possibility of social change are stressed by Latifa:

*'The problem within our community is that a boy can do everything, girls cannot do anything, for example, they cannot touch the telephone, they cannot go outside. For that purpose, I arrange trips for them or to see a good film. [South Asian] women are always a disadvantaged group in this country because the men don't want them to go outside [of their homes] and do something. There are so many problems for young girls, as you know because of the different culture at home compared to school. We have to educate the parents to be*



*tolerant while living in this country, you cannot restrict the girls as your background states.'*

(Latifa, Muslim Women's Organisation)

Educating parents of young women was regarded as essential to changing attitudes towards education and marriage within the Asian community. The above participant also comments on the methods employed by parents to ensure compliance by their daughters especially concerning marriage. The overlaying of cultural practices with religion further complicates the issue. Therefore Latifa used Islam as an example: to show how parents' lack of consultation with their daughters sometimes resulted in rebellious behaviour, including running away from home. The education and awareness of parents is considered vital to challenging the dominant ideology of the 'good wife', respectability and standing in the community.

These are issues that are relevant also to women who do not flee domestic violence. Through their decision to remain in violent relationships, they also contribute to the perpetuation of an ideology that is framed as an act of martyrdom. These women stay in violent marriages to enable their daughters to marry suitable men. Changing the positioning of women, as subordinate to men, requires the rejection of dominant ideologies and discourses. Thus for some participants, it would require a process of learning:

*'It's a re-learning to unlearn all those things that she has learned to believe what is right.'*

(Parvati, Asian Women's Project)

*'It's very important that we teach our children, especially our daughters the basic ingredient of life, of identity, of individuality.'*

(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

I would argue that the statements above show how sentiments gravitated towards the way in which women are socialized into subservient roles. I believe they also highlight firstly, the symbiotic relationship between influential social and cultural factors. Secondly, the ways in which women can initiate social change within the community *and* amongst themselves. Individual change is reflected through putting forward the ideas of centring as an important component in raising women's self esteem. I think that the raising awareness (or in feminist language, 'raising consciousness') through mental processes and through sharing of experience to reveal collective conditions is a central component in changing what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' woman in Asian political networks. This issue is raised in subsequent sections of this chapter. The next section looks at sexist stereotyping and what constitutes the 'typical Asian women'.

### **'The Typical Asian Woman' – Stereotyping and Sexism**

The previous chapter examined how race features as one of the most important tools of analysis with meanings being attached to race through the processes of mythification and stereotyping (Dyer, 1997; Omi and Winant, 1986). This section examines sexist stereotyping of South Asian women, the discourses that dictate modes of behaviour and acceptable forms of femininity. It explores the role culture and traditional forms of dress as both compliance and subversion. With reference to stereotyping, some of the women in my research described their ideas of a 'stereotypical South Asian woman'. They also used it to comment on the ways in which the stereotype can be rejected, through processes of negotiation and sometimes compromise. A stereotype involves the reduction of a person to negative and exaggerated characteristics and



'stereotyping reduces, essentializes and naturalizes and fixes "difference"' (Hall, 1997:258). It is through the operation of power that a stereotype is able to create a boundary between what constitutes the 'normal' and the 'other'. Thus stereotyping of South Asian women can be based on dress codes, for example, the 'traditional' attire, and behaviour. One of the women in my research commented on her perception of a stereotypical Asian woman:

*'I think my mum has been quite disappointed in my sister because she's never done Asian girl things really. She's had a very different approach, I mean she's had quite an influence on me in terms of me deciding that I wanted something more [...] I just didn't want to end up as an Asian female stereotype, wearing a salwaar kameez, going to community functions, being the perfect daughter, being able to make tea in the right way. I think they [parents] accept that I'm not going to adopt this dutiful daughter role wholesale, going to various Asian functions and doing the air-headed sipping tea bit round at my mum's friends and watching the latest Bollywood movies. It's just not me. I enjoy just meeting up with friends, going to the cinema, reading and learning about things, listening to music. I like travelling, to visit friends and stuff.'*

(Zora, Antiracism Organisation)

Zora identifies 'Asian girl things' as activities of Asian women within a community setting by associating Hindi films, traditional dress and drinking tea with the Asian woman stereotype. Her recognition of other activities places her outside the parameters of the community and Zora goes on to say that she does not participate in the community, instead she regards her parents' home as simply somewhere to sleep. References to a stereotypical Asian woman refer to the representation of Asian females within an acceptable ideology of femininity, as passive, docile and obedient. Zora has also positioned herself differently to the expected position of the dutiful daughter and challenges the powerful discourse of acceptable femininity which, effectively controls women. Her references consist of the ways in which an Asian woman is expected to



behave and dress. If a certain dress is associated with being a certain type of Asian female then Zora interpreted Asian dress and dutiful behaviour as compliance. Thus, the 'Asian woman stereotype' is in Zora's discursive universe and her rejection of it as the means by which she constructs her agency. However, Rekha aware of the stereotype, shows how the discursive positioning through stereotyping can be challenged precisely through the *adoption* of traditional attire. Therefore, traditional dress does not necessarily imply compliance, or that the woman in question is a stereotypical Asian woman. On the contrary, it can be used to make a statement and as a form of resistance to racism. This is how Rekha explained her decision to wear a sari:

*'I'll tell you a story why I started wearing a sari. I started to wear a sari from the age of eighteen. That's very unusual being brought up in England and living here. I think since I was a little girl I was politically aware of things happening around me. Although I didn't understand what it was to define it, to define racism as such, but I felt it. So I challenged it in my own way. When I was about sixteen or seventeen, I was waiting for a bus in a queue and there was an Asian couple, the woman was wearing a sari at the front of the queue. When she got on, some white people just started shouting at her and accused her of jumping the queue. I knew she was there [from the beginning], I felt she was being racially attacked. She was told a lot of things about her appearance, she was wearing a sari, she was [pause], they assumed that she was stupid, she couldn't speak the language, therefore she was stupid because of how she looked. They were horrible and that sort of thing bothered me and at that time [I thought] here's my way of dealing with it. I'm going to start wearing a sari from tomorrow and let them pick on me, to see what happens.'*

(Rekha, Asian Women's Advisory Project)

The wearing of traditional dress holds meanings to outsiders in conveying negative messages. However, as Rekha says, it does not necessarily represent women as under patriarchal control, particularly if the woman in question asserts a cultural identity as a way of resisting racism. If however, it continues to be deployed as a stereotype, as expressed by the first interviewee, how do we explain the adoption of traditional Asian dress by the successful DJ Radical

Sista (Ranjit Kaur) in the public sphere reserved for 'emancipated' women?

Radical Sista comments on her following and form of dress in an interview:

I get a lot of girls writing to me and stuff about how to get started. The only mail I get from guys is 'Are you married? Do you want to get married?' [...] When I DJ I go on with Asian gear on. It's really weird 'cos it really freaks people out! But, it's also great when people see you as a role model. There's a group of people now, wherever I go, a group of women and there's even like four guys that follow me all over the country. [...] I know it's a political thing – the very fact that as an Asian woman I am actually 'out there' for a start, and the fact that I'm wearing Asian gear just makes the point in itself a way. Because people look and go 'What's she doing there?' You know if I was wearing Ragga shorts and a little bra top, they would hardly bat an eyelid. Asian guys would, they'd look 'phwaar, hey', but other people wouldn't really give a damn. But, seeing someone in full 'traditional dress' doing something that's like a Western concept doesn't correlate with the expected images of Asian women.

(Radical Sista in Sharma et al, 1996:98)

Some South Asian women do not have one uniform view of Asian dress as either oppressive or subversive. Radical Sista's decision to wear a *salwaar kameez*, lies in her ability to present an identity which at once supports the perceptions of outsiders and confuses them – a return of the gaze. However, if these women are challenging the perceptions of conformity and compliance, they must be employing strategies to do this. Despite the adoption of aspects of Asian ethnicity as vogue in popular culture (Sharma et al., 1996), it does not prevent comments such as the following:

*'I mean some people used to say to me "what are you doing in them Asian clothes? Take those Paki clothes off." And I was like, because I was much lighter at that time and I just looked at her and I went: "excuse me I am a Paki." She goes to me, "Oh I've got nothing against you, you know, against your colour but you're white and you should be proud of being white." I said, "no I'm not white, I'm a Paki and I'm very proud of being a Paki."*

(Samia, Women's Centre)



Samia's reaction to being called a 'Paki' on the basis of her dress was to appropriate the term 'Paki' and respond assertively. Samia realised that her cultural identity expressed through her form of dress was being denigrated. If however, South Asian women wear western clothes and are assumed to have 'integrated' to an extent, their roles are put into question by the statement: 'it must be so hard leading a double life.' On the question of leading a double life, Zainab replied:

*'I explain myself as living between two cultures. When I'm at home with my own family, my behaviour is more in line with what's sort of expected in the Pakistani Muslim family context, you know it goes down even to dress code. I dress differently and although I don't wear cultural dress here, I would wear it at home and I wouldn't wear this sort of dress at home necessarily, so you know, it's different. I'm conforming to a limited extent [...] They [parents] are not saying to me you can't do this but I'm sure if I was getting that, it would make me think. At the moment I'm just doing it almost unconsciously, but you know, it's fine, let's wear this today, let's wear that today, whatever.'*  
(Zainab, Asian Women's Project)

The 'double life' aspect could be regarded as a stereotype as it involves positioning South Asian people as forever outside the 'majority' culture on the basis of their 'race' or ethnicity. Zainab's statement above shows that the participant viewed herself as living between two cultures, although she too justified this on the basis that she had compromised and negotiated. To an extent, her comments are in agreement with Narayan's suggestion that non-western people faced with a multiplicity of experience suppress one aspect in order to live comfortably in another, resulting in unbelonging and alienation from both and disempowerment (Narayan, 1989). Therefore, although alienation, unbelonging and disempowerment can occur, the women in the research also compromised and negotiated freedoms. Moreover, even though large sections of the 'South Asian' communities have a longevity of presence with the



production of syncretic cultures, the very notion of applying the term 'non-western' people to them suggests that they remain part of an un-reconfigured binary between east and west. In contrast to this view my research suggests that we need to look at the shifting contours of cultural traditions which are fractured by gender. This would help avoid relying on culturalist explanations that can contribute to stereotyping of South Asian women and culture, with western culture and the freedom experienced by western women, promoted as superior. Indeed, Avtar Brah illustrates how a culturalist explanation is inadequate with reference to the education of South Asian girls:

There is a tendency among teachers to see most problems encountered by Asian girls as being the result of 'intergenerational conflict'. Yet there is no evidence to support the implied assertion that conflict levels are higher amongst Asian families than among white families. Asian parents tend to be portrayed as 'authoritarian', 'conservative' and supposedly 'opposed to the liberating influence of schools'. But there is as much variation among Asian parents on issues concerning the education of their children as can be expected in any other group of parents. There are many problems with 'culturalist explanations', not least that they can have the effect of blaming the subordinate group as well as providing legitimacy to the ideology which claims superiority of Western cultural practices over non-Western ones.

(Brah, 1996:80)

Brah takes into account the heterogeneous nature of the South Asian category, with levels of freedom for women varying amongst different South Asian groups. In contrast to the culturalist explanation, some of the participants rejected the idea of a double life or living between two cultures exemplified by the following statement:

*'I refute this idea of leading a double life because I do compromise to a certain extent by virtue of the fact that I live with my parents [...] There are certain*

*things you would and would not say in front of your parents [...] I'm virtually the same at home as I am outside and there are slight compromises in so much that obviously, I wouldn't bring a man back home. [...] I suppose he [colleague] assumed that I was completely different when I am at home as to how I am outside. That's just not the case, I mean I do smoke in my bedroom, I have sneaky fags.'*

(Zora, Antiracism Organisation)

The statement shows how young South Asian women experience varying degrees of freedom. Through compromising with their parents they are able to negotiate a certain level of freedom. It is also unclear whether there are fundamental differences for white English or African-Caribbean girls. Indeed, sexual freedom for young women is usually non-negotiable across cultures, for example, female youth cultures are often conducted within the private sphere (McRobbie, 1991). Because South Asian women have been characterized as being 'between two cultures' (Watson, 1977) or caught in the 'culture clash', this often fails to take into account how they can operate different cultural codes, and acts to discursively deny them agency. Brah (1996) argues that, because both Asian and British cultures are not homogeneous, we can no longer talk about the idea of 'two cultures' or 'cultural conflict'. The cultural conflict is usually designated to Asian culture although intergenerational conflict occurs across cultures.

In fact, Brah believes that there is a multi-directional relationship between the two 'cultures' and that, if there is a 'culture clash', then it is not so widespread as imagined. In her study of young South Asians, Gillespie (1995) has shown that they were able to constitute for themselves a British Asian identity. British Asian identity shifts within the discourses of Britishness and Asianness, and is often compounded by differences in religion, age, gender and class.



Thus, it becomes a difficult task to assign subjects such as 'South Asian' with specific, fixed cultural identities because they can occupy a range of identities, which are constantly shifting according to circumstances. Therefore, in the case of traditional attire of South Asian women and being regarded as stereotypes, a range of positions are available and these provide the space for the constitution and expression of agency. South Asian women may argue that traditional dress is misrepresented in the media, they can also argue from a feminist perspective that the policing of sexuality is a patriarchal practice. A range of positions exist including that which does not take 'race' or ethnicity into account, for example when adopting a certain style or music of youth culture. These identities are not fixed but created when age, 'race', gender and class intersect and shows the ability of women to move across spatial and discursive sites.

I argue that in terms of their identity, South Asian women are able to occupy several contexts simultaneously, a multiplicity rather than a duality (Puar, 1996; Mama, 1995). Thus South Asian women may not see themselves 'between (at least) two great cultural assemblages' (Gilroy, 1993:1). Although they may feel a sense of dislocation and displacement at times (Narayan, 1989), they are able to occupy a political space, a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1990) which is a space of resistance with the resources of the centre. For South Asian women, the process involves a complex combination of identities, formed out of experiences of living in Britain and is something that cannot be simply adopted and thrown away at will. I will now turn to explanations of patriarchy as viewed through mainstream feminism because the implication is that patriarchy is universal and static.



## Is Patriarchy Universal?

Western feminist theory locates the family as a site of women's subordination with patriarchal ideology constructing and controlling women's sexuality through marriage (Brah, 1996; Barrett and McIntosh, 1985). In connection with women's oppression, a multitude of explanations concerned with female subjugation is evident in feminist theory<sup>1</sup> (Oakley, 1974). However with reference to sexual 'difference', Christine Di Stefano comments:

Research on gender suggests, among other things, that men and women in contemporary Western societies are differently constituted as modern human subjects; that they inhabit, experience and construct the sociopolitical world in different, often incommensurable ways [...]  
Cross-cultural research on gender reveals several important findings that may be summed up in the following way: On the one hand, gender seems to be a nearly universal feature of all human societies. On the other hand, the actual contents of gender definitions have an astonishingly wide-ranging cross-cultural variability, and it is not always the case that "difference" translates into "unequal."

(Di Stefano, 1990: 60)

Cross-cultural variability is an important point to make in the analysis of South Asian women's positioning. However, if the subjugation of women is perceived in the sense of a universal understanding, as a dichotomy of male domination and female subordination, this does not provide an adequate explanation of the changing forms of autonomy and constraint in an increasingly complex and plural society (McNay, 2000). This complexity is illustrated by the different forms of inequalities between men and women based on divisions of race and class. Thus, taking into account the complexity, mainstream feminism has developed through a critique of dualities such as the 'public/private' and 'culture/nature', and deconstruction of fundamental categories such as 'woman'. In current

debates around political activity, therefore, the questions for feminists are around whether women can operate as a unified body with all their differences to resist oppression. Secondly, whether feminism can simultaneously engage successfully with 'differences' in theory and practice. On the powerful role of patriarchy, as identified by mainstream feminism, Audre Lorde comments on the oppression of women and racial differences:

But to imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression because we are women, is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy [...] The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries.

(Lorde, 1981:95-97)

If there are varied tools of patriarchy, then there must also be varied tools for challenging it. The participants in the research, with their different perspectives, engaged in types of political activity at a localised level, in their efforts to resist different types of power – both of the State and the community. Without falling into the trap of claims to authenticity and hierarchies of oppression, Lorde (1981) highlights the assumption made by theories of patriarchy. These theories are based on male domination and a reliance on the fixed identities of 'woman' and 'man'. As shown in the previous chapter, the concept woman as a universal category has been challenged. Similarly Black feminists<sup>2</sup> (Carby, 1982) and others have challenged the idea of a universal patriarchy, with the family as a key site of oppression. The importance is the claim that the ways in which gender and race have interacted historically has a bearing on complex ethnic and gender relations. Consequently, feminist investigations into gender, identity and agency need to shift the debate from the ahistorical nature of patriarchal



theories and female subordination to a 'dialectic of stasis and change' (McNay, 2000:2).

Within feminist analysis there have been attempts to shift theory beyond the concept of patriarchy (Pollert, 1996; Acker, 1989). The most recent by Pollert (1996) represents a critical intervention into the influential work of Sylvia Walby (1986, 1989; 1990). Walby's work aims to confer primacy to the concept of patriarchy in relation to class. The aim of Pollert's critique is to show:

That 'patriarchy' as *explanation* of gender relations perpetuates the theoretical tradition of abstract 'semi autonomous structure'; as I shall argue, this loses the tension between agency and structure necessary to understand social process, and ends in a static form of systems theory.

(Pollert, 1996: 646)

The importance of Pollert's critique of Walby's 'six main patriarchal structures' for this research resides in its utility for the conceptualization and analysis of South Asian women's 'agency'. If Walby's static notions of forms of patriarchy are carried through to its logical conclusion, then South Asian women would continue to suffer under the weight of patriarchal relations through the state, male violence, sexuality and culture. In other words, South Asian women would be seen only as victims under patriarchal oppression, not as active agents who possess the capacity for social change. However, as shown in Sudbury's analysis of black women's political activism, agency can be conceptualized on a wider basis. Thus both empirically and theoretically South Asian women can be shown to 'have agency' at different levels of interaction, 'the individual, the family, the community and mainstream power structures: the local, the national and the international' (Sudbury, 1998:60). Therefore a broader notion of agency



would support Pollert's critique of Walby's theorisation of patriarchy as static which hinders an appreciation of women's agency. Pollert's main criticism is the way in which capitalism and patriarchy are presented as closed systems interacting with each other – a dual systems conceptualization. Although class relations feature in Pollert's work as the mode of analysis, to overcome the dualism of gender and class, she suggests instead that:

A different view is that class relations are infused with gender, race and other modes of social differentiation *from the start*. [...] By grasping class and gender as fully intertwined, we can gain purchase on the social dynamic of their construction *and* possibilities of change from the tensions and contradictions in experience.

(Pollert, 1996:646-47)

Thus I will use Pollert's work to illustrate the ways in which class, 'race' and gender are interconnected. In much the same way that Pollert shows through empirical research that this interconnection occurs at the level of social relations, my research similarly incorporates the idea of structural constraints and opportunity as providing the dynamic within which agency is constituted and expressed. I will use the term patriarchy as a descriptive not an explanatory tool for male domination. In this way it will be possible to examine: firstly, the ways in which South Asian women are viewed as oppressed and as victims of patriarchal control; secondly, what the participants describe; and lastly, the challenges women make to their subjugation. The following sections therefore use sexist stereotyping to examine how patriarchy, through the constructs of 'good women' and 'bad women' is able to control South Asian women's behaviour. It will also examine the implications of the subjugation of South Asian women's identities within marriage and sexuality.

## **Sexist Stereotyping and the Influence of the 'Good Women' and 'Bad Women' Constructs**

In my research, I have found that the construction of what constitutes a 'good woman' or a 'bad woman' falls under the remit of two concepts related to Asian culture; 'shame' (*sharam*) and honour (*izzat*). They feature as important factors in South Asian women's lives, acting as a form of community surveillance (Bhopal, 1997; Wilson, 1978). Ideas of shame and honour also feature in the lives of other minority ethnic women, as Sasha Josephides comments with reference to Greek Cypriot women, their application to women differs greatly from that for men:

The issues of marriage and the family bring into focus all those values in Mediterranean culture that come under the label 'honour and shame'. Honour is carried by both families and individuals and involves the notion of respectability, reputation and integrity as well as the idea that each person should act correctly according to their role and position within society. Thus there is a difference between the way honour applies to men and women. Furthermore, it appears that honour is only applied to women in a negative sense, in the form of 'shame', the counterpart of honour. Women display appropriate shame by being generally modest and obedient but the essential ingredient of shame is sexual modesty [...] in order to retain their honour men have to control women's sexuality.

(Josephides, 1988:36)

The understanding of honour and shame is identical in Greek Cypriot and South Asian culture. The mechanisms of honour and shame, and their negative applications to women have resulted in South Asian women only seen as victims of 'archaic cultural practices' (Brah, 1992b) such as marriage and family systems. These practices are viewed as problematic in British society (ibid.) Honour and shame with the accompanying internal oppression from within the

community is something that the women in my research had to contend with. Thus dominant forms of ideology prescribe modes of behaviour for South Asian women and the interviewees expressed anger at the controlling concepts of honour (*izzat*) and shame (*sharam*):

*'You know the concept of izzat and honour, that is the cultural thing that is killing our women.'*  
(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

If honour and shame are killing women then there are also women who have individually challenged culture and religion, to live independent lives. In some cases, they risk loneliness, mental illness and suicide, as Pragna Patel states: 'suicide rates among Asian women between the ages of 16 and 35 in Britain are up to three times the national average for the 16 to 35 age group' (P. Patel, 1997: 263). This age group shows the lack of support and understanding from the community and is one of the reasons why Asian women's projects have been set up. However, resistance to social change can also come from women themselves, especially when religion is used to organise around. This is something to which I return in the next chapter.

One of the women in my research suggests the active role that women themselves must play in order to bring about social change:

*'In the end, it is the women that have to change. The mother-in-law will have to remember that once she was the daughter-in-law. She has to put a stop to her behaviour, only then can the system change. The women are to blame; they have to say to the son that you are not going to touch this woman.'*  
(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)



Neesha argues that women should take responsibility for their actions and position in society. It is indeed women who have begun to make the changes through projects like those to which Neesha belongs, making social change possible. In connection with the reproduction of ideologies of the 'good' and 'bad' woman, she makes references to the power of cultural forms such as film in the perpetuation of sexism (violence and rape) within South Asian communities. The influential role of film should not be underestimated, particularly in the context of shaping children's perceptions of the world.

Many of the women in my research had witnessed the effects of violence on women. They are concerned about the representation of women as victims of male violence in popular Hindi films that serves to reinforce the opinion that women are considered disposable. The stereotypical roles played by women is not limited to popular Hindi films, it is apparent in television and film in the Britain and the United States (Young, 1996; Meehan, 1983). The film medium offers few alternatives for women but it is the continuity of such roles by filmmakers which depict women as 'good'/'idealised' (without agency) or 'bad'/'deviant' (with agency) on a global level (Krishnan and Dighe, 1990). The 'good'/'idealised' women are those who demonstrate modesty and conformity through behaviour and traditional attire. The 'bad'/'deviant' women are those who refuse to conform and display behaviour contrary to acceptable forms of femininity. They are usually women who hold 'modern' views as opposed to the acceptable 'traditional' roles of wife, mother or daughter assigned to them by society. The 'bad'/'deviant' women who transgress the mores of society are punished, usually by men.

Patriarchy is a social structure and this is a particularly important point with reference to the value placed on women's lives, as they only become respectable and acceptable when they have been 'tamed' by a man and the family. This is a familiar story line in Indian films and television that present to their viewers, acceptable forms of femininity and behaviour. The acceptable forms of behaviour in turn reflect and affirm society's 'rules' (ibid.).

However, to counteract identifications with sexist stereotyping, over the last decade in Britain, the film director, Gurinder Chada, has been at the forefront of presenting South Asian femininity in challenging and contradictory ways. Films such as *'Bhaji on the Beach'* and *'Bend it Like Beckham'* demonstrate South Asian women as active agents in preference to the 'typical Asian woman' stereotype.

The next section firstly looks at a particular configuration of 'patriarchy' that of marriage and the status it confers on South Asian women in the community. It is the 'good' and 'idealised' woman who is 'doing the right thing' through conformity to an acceptable form of femininity and behaviour.

### **'Doing the Right Thing' – Marriage as Status in the Community**

*'I suppose the pressure is on me because it's only me and I have to do the right thing to redeem, you know, the family honour.'*  
(Kanwal, Asian Women's Project))

'Doing the right thing' and the undervaluing of women starts at an early age, with the ascribed identities of daughter, wife or mother. Described in relation to men and given the stark choices between 'good' and 'bad' women, it should



come as no surprise that their partners and families treat women, in some cases, in the most horrific ways imaginable. The following statement illustrates the self-esteem of some South Asian women and their attitudes towards marriage:

*'I was brought up to be a housewife; I wasn't brought up to actually go out to work. My husband wanted a good girl to get married to, he wanted a girl who had never had a bad reputation, okay and he got me. He got somebody who would be compliant.'*

(Parvati, Asian Women's Project)

What is evident in the Parvati's statement is the link to the family. Feminists have argued that the family is a contradictory key site of oppression and patriarchal control and one of resistance to sexism and racism. While marriage practices are not the same for all South Asian groups, as exemplified in Roger Ballard's *Desh Pardesh* (1994), I would argue that marriage, the essential/desired precursor to family, alongside sexuality, could also be regarded as one of the sites of agency, where active choice of a partner or the choice not to marry can provide alternatives for South Asian women. The following accounts illustrate something of this. The first sheds some light on refusing to comply with the rituals of meeting a marriage partner. The last two statements on the consequences of refusing to marry:

*'If they [parents] introduced you to someone, it was like you dressed up traditionally, you put a sari on, you took the tea in and what have you. And I wasn't prepared to do that, you know. And I think, I mean through the years, I think from childhood I must have rebelled because my mother always says, well you're different, you're not like your sister, you're different.'*

(Zora, Antiracism Organisation)

*'It was like subtle hints and then pure frustration as to why I didn't want to get married, you know. [They said] "we'll give you a deposit for a house." [There*



were] financial bribes you know and then it was," okay, you pick the partner", you know, "you choose somebody." I said "no." [Then] I was given an ultimatum at the end of the day. It was like "either you agree to get married or there is no place for you here." So I left, you know, just packed my bag. [...] They thought I was warped or something, that I was colluding with a group of these women [at the refuge] who were nothing more than trouble makers, you know, who had strange ideas of changing the world, the life of Asian women.'

(Sofia, Asian Women's Project)

'I'm not married although initially, I'm 37, initially I had been asked, why are you not getting married, why don't you want to get married? From the age of 18 to 25 I would say I had a lot of questions, if not so much from my parents immediately, but my extended family members. Although it's not a new concept that single women can survive on their own, in my community, where I come from, the concept of women being without their husbands is not very acceptable. There is a view that women are born to get married and bear children. So that sort of pressure I had to go through for a certain period of time. It sort of stopped I would say about four or five years ago. After I was 32 or so perhaps they thought [pause] they accepted it that I'm not going to get married, if that's what I want. Although I did not ever say that I won't get married, I think subconsciously to keep power to myself, I said I will get married when I'm ready. . [...] If I'm 50 or over 50, I'll decide then. [...] If I want to get married, that's up to me, we left it like that. It's not an issue any longer although it was a struggle.'

(Rekha, Asian Women's Advisory Project)

In terms of understanding South Asian marriage practices, there are problematic areas in connection with the multiculturalist understanding of the concept 'arranged marriage' and the 'ideological constructions of Asian practices' (Brah, 1996:72). The multiculturalist understanding of arranged marriages and issues related to 'Asian cultural practices' are usually couched in an understanding of minority group rights. The next section therefore looks at the notion of multiculturalism and its relationship to community issues such as marriage.

## Multiculturalist Understandings and Community Issues

The idea of multiculturalism and community issues has a relationship to citizenship within liberal democratic states such as Britain. On this relationship Stuart Hall comments:

Far from being a settled doctrine, 'multiculturalism' is a deeply contested idea [...] It is contested by the conservative Right, in defence of the purity and cultural integrity of the nation. It is contested by liberals, who claim that the 'cult of ethnicity' and the pursuit of difference threaten the universalism and neutrality of the liberal state, undermining personal autonomy, individual liberty and formal equality. Multiculturalism, some liberals also say, legitimates the idea of 'group rights'. But this subverts the dream that one nation and one citizenship can be constructed out of the diverse cultures of different peoples - *e pluribus unum*.

(Hall, 2001:210-211)

The question is can South Asian women claim their rights and resist sexist norms and practices through an appeal to multicultural citizenship? Indeed the nature of citizenship itself is contested as explored below:

[...] modern citizenship is inserted into a social field, an arena of competing, heterogeneous and partially overlapping discourses. Within this field, freedom, autonomy and the right to be different – central credos of democratic citizenship – are pitched against the regulating forces of modernity and the state and subverted by discourses of 'culture and tradition' – of nationalism, religiosity and the family. [...] As an unstable political and jural formation, citizenship both compounds and confounds contradictory tendencies: of universalism and particularism, freedom and order, individual rights and collective responsibilities, identity and difference, nation and individual. [...] it is therefore always inflected by power and by the commonsense assumptions of hegemonic cultural and political elites.

(Werbner and Yuval-Davis, 1999:1-3)



The multicultural model of citizenship (Castles and Miller, 1993) has been contested through its treatment of groups as culturally homogeneous rather than recognizing differences based on class and gender (Yuval-Davis, 1991; Bhavnani, 1993a). Kymlicka's (1995) distinction between two types of 'minority rights' can help us to analyze South Asian women's rejection of multicultural citizenship as a model of emancipation. The first type is when the minority group interests are promoted, thus equality and freedom between and amongst groups are ensured. The second type concerns minority groups imposing restrictions on their own members, based on traditional practices. Problems associated with the second type are toleration of diversity within the private sphere and a view of culture as static. Located within the private sphere is the family and the critical point to consider is power inequalities, i.e. who determines acceptable forms of femininity and behaviour. For South Asian women to opt out of the traditions and practices of cultural groups, they often risk being ostracized by the family and the community. Multicultural policies have often meant internal affairs of the community being managed by (male) community leaders. On the issue of community leaders and the reaction to increasing amounts of knowledge available to young women, Parminder commented:

*'Young girls are beginning to act or beginning to know about their rights, are being exposed to all types of information and you know the Asian community does feel threatened by it because they just want to wrap every woman, every daughter, you know, their wives in their [domestic] domain. They don't want anyone to penetrate that and put ideas and thoughts into them.'*  
(Parminder, Asian Women's Project)

One area where knowledge of the law is thought to be dangerous is about marriage and the rights a person has. Thus, under English law a marriage can



be contested if it is not based on consent. Amongst Asian communities consent has sometimes been overlooked. Although a multiculturalist understanding would 'tolerate' such practices, a number of cases taken through the legal courts, by both men and women demonstrate, that there are cultural practices which are rejected within the community. Other aspects include the issue of domestic violence within the private sphere. As the work of high profile organizations such as Southall Black Sisters have shown, the reluctance of the law to intervene in domestic issues has left many women in dangerous situations.

The critique of group rights and the impact on women is stated by Susan Moller Okin in, 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?' Okin comments:

Religious or cultural groups often are particularly concerned with "personal law" – the laws of marriage, divorce, child custody, division and control of family property, and inheritance. As a rule, then, the defense of "cultural practices" is likely to have much greater impact on the lives of women and girls than on those of men and boys, since far more of women's time and energy goes into preserving and maintaining the personal, familial, and reproductive side of life. Obviously, culture is not only about domestic arrangements, but they do provide a major focus of most contemporary cultures [...] The second most important connection between culture and gender is that most cultures have as one of their principal aims the control of women by men. (Okin, 1999:13)

Okin sets up the concept of 'minority group rights' in opposition to feminism and argues that women can only achieve equality if attention is paid to gendered inequalities in the domestic sphere as well as possessing formal rights bestowed on men. Within the domestic sphere and the Asian community, as mentioned above, an aspect of 'personal law' which has courted controversy, is

connected to marriage and the issue of dowries. If marriage is regarded as a status symbol then challenges are difficult to make at a personal level. One of the women I interviewed conveyed her difficulties in approaching her mother about living an independent life away from the family:

*'I would actually like to move away. We [Zora and her mother] don't ever approach the subject, it's just sort of you know, the sort of thing that's either alluded to or just never spoken about. I mean she can't be stupid, she must assume that at some point I'm going to want to make my stab at independence. I think when it comes to my mother, she has two views: either one, I'm only going to leave home if I get married or two, if I die, in my coffin. I suspect she thinks I'm going to do it by going from one extreme to another. And the other extreme being running away from home, which is something that wouldn't enter my mind because you know I'm not the kind of person who will run away from something. I'll try to stand up and if the situation can't be resolved, I'll walk away but I wouldn't be cowardly in my walking away. I mean if I decided to leave home in the next month which is highly unlikely, I'd try to explain to mum what reasons [there were] as to why.'*

(Zora, Antiracism Organisation)

Zora highlights the options available to some women for leaving their parental homes. She also points to a process of negotiation and rationalization with her mother for independence and exercising control over her life, i.e. agency in choosing a way of life. In connection with marriage as an escape route, there is also the cultural practice of dowry-giving. The provision of extravagant dowry giving has sometimes been regarded as the cost of 'selling' a daughter (Bhopal, 1997). To illustrate the price put on a woman's head through the dowry system, in 'Asian Women Exposed to Violence, India: price of a life', *Le Monde diplomatique* (May, 2001) reports on the increasing numbers of 'dowry deaths'. 'Dowry deaths' occur when the bride fails to bring an adequate dowry to her in-laws or after the sustained blackmail of her father to supply increasing amounts of consumer goods. The objection to dowry giving is the effect it has in the commodification of women as 'disposable' items. The report states the role



played by a women's rights organisation, Vimochana in Bangalore, which, has been crucial in uncovering hidden statistics in the deaths of women (between the ages of 18 ad 26) due to 'unnatural causes'. It has also been successful in bringing to justice their murderers. Similarly, Asian women's organisations in Britain have been active in the pursuit of justice, equality and rights. The underlying problem, as one worker commented (Vimochana, India), is very similar to the comments made by the women I interviewed in my research. In *Le Monde diplomatique* one of the workers put it this way:

The main concern is respect for tradition and the social order, women count for little and men are rarely criticised. If anything happens, the husband will say his wife was over-sensitive or flirtatious.

(Le Monde diplomatique, May, 2001:3)

This statement exemplifies how men are able to justify murder on the basis of the unacceptable behaviour of their wives. They are able to claim that it is the transgression of their morality and traditional roles which led to the fatality. Similarly in Britain, it is men's claim to privacy (within a multiculturalist understanding) for acts such as domestic violence, wife murder, and forced marriage in Britain that needs to be resisted. Indeed South Asian women's groups have highlighted inequalities within the domestic sphere and have managed to place issues relevant to women's lives onto the political agenda (P. Patel, 1997). Regarded as 'washing your dirty linen in public', women's groups have been targeted as 'homewreckers'; responsible for tearing the fabric of the community. The fabric of the community refers to traditions and cultural practices that are being disrupted through women's involvement in various projects. Asserting their right to equality and freedom, South Asian women



reject certain cultural practices that are oppressive. In doing so they also reject the notion of group rights which imposes restrictions on their members. It is to these cultural practices that we now turn our attention.

### **Culture and Tearing the Fabric of the Community**

If certain cultural practices such as marriage and divorce can invoke personal law (Okin, 1999) and resistance to it can be depicted as tearing the fabric of the community, it opens 'Asian culture' to criticism. Media reportage of 'controversial issues' such as that in *Le Monde diplomatique* means that cultural practices come to be regarded not only as 'patriarchal' and 'barbaric', but they also act as signifiers of inequality. This process is similar to the reports on *sati* in colonial India (Chapter Three) and detracts from examining the economic and social rights of South Asian women, for example the right to an education. If issues such as these can be regarded as cultural, then these are the practices that the women interviewed for my research opposed. On the notion that Asian culture is regarded as static, Parvati comments:

*' [...] the white majority is. They're very quick to pick on the deficits of the [Asian] culture. They ignore the good values that are there. [...] So that is an example of how they actually make an assumption about me. [...] As it is we have to debate, we have to actually fight, [to] eliminate the misunderstandings and re-educate our own community about how life is, it's not static, culture's not static, it's always changing, and we are modifying, adding to it, making it better as we go along.'*

(Parvati, Asian Women's Project)

The deficits referred to in the above statement are in connection to marriage practices and domestic violence. It is also important to locate within this, the changing nature of culture. Culture is subject to the innovative nature of human agency and it can be regarded as traditional and static as well as creative and

transformative. However, if we remain within the parameters of 'the way of life', a static notion of culture (as applicable to the 'Asian community') is presented with changes being managed within a boundary, yielding to a multiculturalist understanding. It is important to remind ourselves that culture needs to be regarded as contextual, historical and subject to change, and influenced by factors identified at the beginning of the chapter. Thus it is through the construct of diaspora that we must view culture and its susceptibility to change. Stuart Hall explains in connection to cultural identity:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference [...] by allowing us to see and recognise the different parts and histories of ourselves, to construct those points of identification, those positionalities we call in retrospect our 'cultural identities'.

(Hall, 1990: 235-237)

Hall argues that the production of identity is a continuous process. The transformation and continuous nature of cultural identity is also evident within the Asian community. An increasing awareness of issues relevant to South Asian women accompanied by a process of change is apparent. The process of change with reference to marriage was related by some of the women interviewed for my research. Although some of the women I interviewed had had arranged marriages, change is evident in the following woman's statement regarding her own marriage within the Muslim faith. Asked about the reaction of her family had she married someone outside the faith, Zainab said:



*'I suspect that would have been difficult for them at the time. I think my parents would have accepted it but I don't think it would have been very good for the relationship. It would have given them a certain amount of displeasure and I'm sure that they would have tried to persuade me not to, I'm sure they would. They didn't [put any pressure on me]. They didn't. In fact I mean usually I think of it the other way. I suspect they were probably relieved that they didn't have to find me a husband! I found myself one, you know it gives them, one, they don't have to go through this hassle of finding somebody that's going to be suitable to meet. And two, the pressure of having done that, and if things go wrong, you know [them] feeling guilty. So I think they've washed their hands of all their responsibilities. I think in terms of a non-faith person, I'm sure that things would have been difficult. But I think my parents are the type that they would have had, if I still had gone ahead and said that I'm going to get married. They would have turned up to the wedding. They would have done that but we have a relationship where it would be very difficult for them not to maintain contact, or to allow things to reach that point of displeasure that they would have to break off the relationship.'*

(Zainab, Asian Women's Project)

The above statement illustrates a process of negotiation in the constitution and expression of a personal form of agency which is also evident in Gillespie's (1995) study of Punjabi young people in Southall. Gillespie states that male-female relationships and romance are regarded as taboo subjects. However, through the use of soap operas, their own values are explored, confirmed or contradict the parents' culture (ibid.). The opportunity for male-female relationships arises during higher education away from home, as it did for the woman above. However this does not imply that all educated South Asians at college would reject the practice of arranged marriages (Bhopal, 1997). Kalwant Bhopal's study of South Asian women, suggests that the choice of marriage partner outside the community results from higher education levels. In addition she argues that for such an act, women would have brought dishonour to their families. As a result, they would be ostracized from 'the community' and the family. However, changes in cultural practices are more complex as indicated by Zainab above. Similarly, although some of the participants in the research had experienced arranged marriages, they regarded the process as negotiable



rather than compulsory or forced. The following two statements are from women whom I interviewed and who had negotiated their way to a more acceptable way of life for themselves. Both participants had studied in universities away from home. The first statement is by Kanwal, a qualified lawyer:

*'I'm the oldest so there's big pressure on me to get married really as you can imagine. Ideally I think I'd like to really to [get married] one day but I don't see the same urgency as my family does. They wouldn't attempt to coerce you, is the way to put it, [but] you know [it's true] when all your cousins and other relatives have got married and they're producing children left, right and centre. It's more the external society and relatives, saying look at your daughter, when are you going to start the process? If I chose my own partner he would have to be from the same religion of course and would have to be definitely Indian.'*  
(Kanwal, Asian Women's Project)

The second woman, Vijay, comments on her parents' reaction to her decision to marry an English man:

*'We had an Asian ceremony, all of those things just so that mum and dad would feel that I wasn't leaving our culture behind, or our language, so we had an Asian ceremony and that was it. Mum and dad have been very supportive in terms of education and everything. But once they accepted the idea that that I was going to marry someone white, it was fine. But until then, there was a gap of like six or seven months, all hell broke loose, also they felt very let down.'*  
(Vijay, Asian Women's Project)

Although Kanwal had not experienced coercion from her parents, she recognised the pressure to marry a man who fulfilled the religious requirement. Kanwal was having a stormy relationship with a Muslim man and wanted to keep her options open. Her two younger sisters were cohabiting with European men which her parents disapproved of and as a result had ostracized them. All were postgraduates and were encouraged to find their own partners at

university. Conversely, Vijay had maintained a supportive relationship with her parents, despite their initial reaction. Kanwal and Vijay's statements suggest the ability of women to make choices within the context of the emotions of family life regarding their marriage partner. This process of negotiation between parents and their daughters is also recognized in Avtar Brah's study of Asian girls and marriage:

[...] while they did not reject marriage, the girls in particular wanted their own marriages to be established on a more egalitarian basis, with both partners having an equal say in the decision-making. The great majority of the Asian adolescents expected their marriages to be arranged [...] Contrary to the media portrayal, of bullying Asian parents ramming arranged marriages down the throats of their children, many adolescents said they were confident that they would not be forced into a marriage that they did not want. This confidence did not seem to be misplaced, as most parents told me that they would not countenance forcing their children into a marriage against the latter's wishes [...] A significant majority of the parents saw the whole process as a joint undertaking between the parents and the younger person [...] in most households there was scope for negotiation between the parents.

(Brah, 1996:77)

However, negotiation for one of the participants was only possible within caste and religious boundaries. Another woman's decision to marry an African-Caribbean man was received negatively:

*'They [parents] were prejudiced towards black people and the African-Caribbean community. Anything bad that has happened to them, it would be by the African-Caribbean community. So in that respect the media didn't help, it kind of perpetuated that to a great extent. So [pause] they weren't very happy about it all. I think if he had been white, you know, they may have, kind of [been happy]. It wouldn't have been so [difficult].'* (Sonya, Youth Project for Asian Girls)



Sonya's decision to marry outside the South Asian community (and into the African-Caribbean community) resulted in an acrimonious relationship with her parents although her brother supported her in her decision to marry an African-Caribbean man. Her parents had effectively ostracized her from the family and community (Bhopal, 1997). Marriage can then be a problematic issue for women overall and the challenges to the aspects of culture that are deemed unsuitable and patriarchal have been made by South Asian women themselves.

The issue of marriage and its relationship to culture is complex and is illustrated by the women's narratives above. The narratives testify that choosing a marriage partner or negotiating with parents involves agency. Although the responses ranged from favourable to hostility and ostracization, South Asian women are able to define themselves and act as agents of social change within the community. South Asian women therefore have rejected the stereotypical role of 'the victim' who suffers under barbaric practices such as arranged marriages<sup>3</sup> positioning themselves instead as active agents who reject oppressive cultural practices whilst not subscribing to the wholesale rejection of Asian culture. In spite of this development, forced marriage has found its way onto the political agenda. The next section therefore looks at the issue of forced marriage.

### **Forced Marriage.**

Forced marriage as an issue was the concern of an English female lawyer I interviewed, within whose firm the founder of a South Asian women's organization was employed. In connection to women's rights and the role of culture, she stated the following:



*'We are involved in Marriage Choice International, which deals with cultural differences between a bride and a groom and their families, before they get married to understand cultural differences. It is to equip people with knowledge about cultural differences and to prevent marriage break up due to overwhelming differences, for example one brought up in the Pakistani community in Britain, marrying someone from Pakistan. I'm also preparing for a conference in Delhi on an educational programme for the International Bar Association Family Law Committee and Gender Issues Committee. It's called 'The Plight of the Wife' and this is the questionnaire we've done. We've got dozens of people speaking on different aspects, we will then have a discussion on the life of women in Pakistan or Afghanistan or India or here [Britain]. [It is] to see how differences related to law, where the law can help these women.'*  
(Helen, Lawyer)

Marriage and the family form important components in women's understanding of their position within society. Thus, it would be premature at this stage to reject this form of oppression as a western concept but to acknowledge that oppression within South Asian communities is variable. As some of the women in my research pointed out, the family is a site where women's identities are suppressed. The issue of forced marriage has been reported widely in the media over the last few years with examples of mainly young women who have been forced into marriage under duress from their families and relatives. It has also been linked to Muslim communities, resulting in 'honour deaths'<sup>4</sup> carried out by close relatives to redeem the family honour. An example of this is the death of Nazia Bi Ali and her daughter Sana Majid Ali who were killed in a fire in a locked bedroom in Bradford in March 1999. Nazia's husband was initially charged with murder but the case was dismissed due to insufficient evidence, even though she had informed the police that she would be leaving her husband. Although Nazia alleged domestic violence prior to her death, the coroner's inquest ceased after the prosecution collapsed. Southall Black Sisters has tried to intervene campaigning for an inquest to prevent further honour killings (Southall Black Sisters, 2002).

Forced marriage is different from the concept of arranged marriage, as it does not involve consent from both parties. It is also a violation of women's human rights and contravenes international law which states that 'marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses' (Article 16, Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Coercion into marriage can include threatening behaviour, abuse (mental and physical), restrictions on education, finance, dress and movement. In addition, the young women who are coerced into marriage are sometimes taken to the Indian subcontinent to marry much older men (Hossain and Turner, 2001).

High profile organisations such as Southall Black Sisters have been instrumental in demanding recognition and outlawing of forced marriage within South Asian communities. It has resulted in the Home Office commissioned report 'Choice by Right', in June 2000. The Home Office, with the Commonwealth and Foreign Office issued a statement in August 2000 on methods of dealing with forced marriage abroad. Although measures have been taken to protect women from being forced into marriage abroad, the situation in Britain is unsatisfactory. Action taken to deal with domestic issues such as forced marriage has been limited with the fear of alienating communities used as a rationalization (Southall Black Sisters, 2001). Indeed Southall Black Sisters have described forced marriage as an 'honour crime', which is further compounded through the adoption of a multiculturalist understanding by government departments. In their Interim Report (2001) Southall Black Sisters, supported by black and minority women's groups, make recommendations with reference to the accountability and responsibility of the government to tackle the problem of forced marriage. The profile of women's organizations has been



raised further through taking their demands to the United Nations Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, with forced marriage as a priority issue. These women have taken responsibility for highlighting oppressive mechanisms that prevent women from participating in society and they have had their voices heard.

If we regard the challenge to aspects of culture as a point whereby South Asian women exercise agency, then it is not simply a matter of independent (educated) single women making choices to reject arranged marriages (Bhopal, 1997) but includes women with different levels of education. The following statements refer to young women below the age of eighteen, who often seek the help of advisory services or refuges in their rejection of arranged marriages at an early age. The accounts also illustrate some of the issues at stake regarding the aims or claims of agency. Thus they suggest that women want to claim a kind of agentic autonomy to pursue education rather than contravene all the social and cultural norms of their communities:

*'Most of them are self referrals, I would say that for young Asian women there are a lot of issues around culture, parents not accepting them [as] who they are. There are conflict issues. Again isolation is the main one. I feel that the younger generation feels that their parents should accept them for who they are and not expect them to be traditional Asian women like in South Asia, having been brought up here.'*

(Rekha, Asian Women's Advisory Project)

*'I suspect about 30% of our intake at the moment is young women who had either very short marriages or are escaping getting into a marriage because their parents are insisting that they get into an arranged relationship. They may have other relationships and that might be a reason why they're not willing to comply. Or it might just be that it's not a suitable match as far as they're concerned. Very few reconcile [with their families]. Actually we've found that this is the most independent of the groups that we deal with. Most of them are*



*actually able to move into some other form of housing and lead some sort of independent life from their families.'*

(Zainab, Asian Women's Project)

The underlying factor for young women refusing forced marriage is their denial of access to education as illustrated in the following statements:

*'Young women who come to the refuge have said to their parents that they will not allow them to deprive them of their rights to education or to force them into an arranged marriage, because they have secured places at university.'*

(Neesha, Asian Women's Project)

*'[In the Bangladeshi community] the husbands do not approve of education for the women because they will be more difficult to control. However sending girls to school until the age of sixteen is compulsory and causes problems for the parents who would prefer them to be married. One woman cannot come to the classes because her husband is in from working in the restaurant on that day. Otherwise she comes without his knowledge.'*

(Anu, Asian Women's Society)

The restrictions imposed on women are also applicable to young men, who are equally discouraged from studying but at least are encouraged to work. The difference is evident in the statistics on the participation of Bangladeshi women in the labour market. The statistics support the claim that denial of access to education leads to low levels of participation amongst certain South Asian groups (Modood et al. 1997; Brah, 1994). It also exemplifies the earlier point that Asian women cannot be regarded as a homogeneous group. Education is regarded as a key factor in empowering women, acting as a way of raising awareness and consciousness of the women. Education acts as a place where knowledge of rights can be gained. Women's education is of the utmost importance and particularly crucial to mothers who are the main educators of children. Thus the realization is that the education of women is central and

necessary to instigate any form of social change and to have a voice. As Trinh states:

You who understands the forced removal-relocation-reeducation-redefinition, the humiliation of having to falsify your own reality, your voice – you know. And often cannot say it. You try and you keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don't, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said.

(Trinh, 1989:80).

'They' in the above context can be the family, the community, or the state. South Asian women are involved in a struggle against oppression, in gaining rights through using liberal democracy to negotiate their way round power structures. It is a process of self-definition and empowerment, to avoid 'triple jeopardy' (Trinh, 1989). In the complexity of identities, we now turn to the subjugation of sexual identity. The policing of women's sexuality is central to respectability in marriage and in maintaining Asian culture and honour, the next section therefore explores the 'sexuality taboo'.

### **'Doing the Wrong Thing' – The Sexuality Taboo**

The aim of this section is to highlight how sexuality as a site of agency represents a threat to 'Asian culture'. If marriage confers status on South Asian women in the community and is deemed as 'doing the right thing', lesbian sexuality is regarded as 'doing the wrong thing' and a taboo. Indeed racialized discourses have presented South Asian women as exotic, repellent, or licentious. Brah (1996) argues that they have served to 'privilege white women over black women even as they subordinate both categories and at the same time render lesbian sexuality largely invisible' (ibid:79). South Asian women's



sexuality has been presented as both dangerous and destructive or subservient to masculinity (Rattansi, 1994 Parmar, 1982). Given these discourses, it is important to move beyond these binaries to reveal South Asian women as actively involved in their choices related to sexuality. I argue that the choice of an alternative sexuality, lesbian sexuality can be considered to be one of many sites of agency, in much the same way as choice in marriage. Once again it further represents a shift from viewing South Asian women as victims of patriarchy. This would be in opposition to the expectations of a traditional virtuous womanhood prescribed by colonialists. Given the expansive literature on the issues surrounding sexuality, there is very little on the issue of 'race' and sexuality<sup>5</sup>. When South Asian women express themselves as lesbians, their sexuality is often in conflict with preconceptions or stereotypes as Rani Kawale (2003) notes in her research on South Asian lesbian identity and space:

White women often stereotype South Asian women according to stereotypical notions of traditional family life, and therefore regard them as being unable to construct lesbian or bisexual identities or lifestyles in the same way as white lesbians. For example, the comments made by white lesbians to Sujata included 'How on earth did you come out to your parents? It must've been so difficult to be growing up in such a strict family' and 'Won't your parents try to marry you?'

(Kawale, 2003:185)

Stereotyping can be based on traditional family life and as suggested in the second section can also be on the basis of traditional South Asian attire, the *salwaar kameez*, or the *sari*. When the two types of stereotyping are fused, it becomes difficult to know how to react. Thus Kawale (2003) shows that in Asian only venues, women dressed in traditional clothes to make themselves look purposefully Asian. This is similar to DJ Radical Sista dressing in traditional



clothes to confuse the gaze of the onlooker. Kawale also argues that South Asian women's subjectivity is constituted from 'multiple identities such as ethnicity *and* sexuality [...] whether they are heterosexual, lesbian or bisexual' (Kawale, 2003:193). Yet despite the social and legal recognition of homosexuality in Britain through the gay movement *and* the (sometimes-uncomfortable) link with the (black) feminist movement (in the past), sexuality and lesbianism within the South Asian communities is still regarded as a taboo subject. This is something one of the women in my research, Pardeep, took care to relate to me:

*'I think [pause] I think [pause] I don't have the right words actually, I think the Asian community still needs to have its awareness raised on the issue of domestic violence particularly taboo subjects like sexual abuse, men and women's sexual identity as well. Subjects like that are rarely ever discussed and if there is the slightest hint of a rumour or you know, anything, it is very quickly brushed under the carpet. Anything that doesn't, anything that Asian people in general do not like to see. That would be a threat on their culture. You know there are so many women who for example, are lesbians but the community won't know about it and they are forced to live secret lives. You know you read about people who sort of marry and they are really unhappy, and they have only done it to please their parents.'*  
(Pardeep, Asian Women's Project)

This affirms Kawale's (2003) argument that due to constant surveillance of South Asian women, their sexuality is increasingly difficult but essential to maintain. Some lesbian women therefore may lead secret lives as suggested above, however there are some spaces being created where women can express their sexuality more freely. These spaces are limited and often cater for a younger age group. Sometimes due to the expectation that South Asian women will marry, some participants commented on the doubts raised about their sexuality by the community, if they did not secure a marriage by a certain age:

*'Although I haven't heard directly, but perhaps people have the idea that I'm a lesbian because I'm not married. I haven't had any direct conversation about it but it's sort of an assumption, because it's such a taboo subject, people don't talk about it, wouldn't talk about with me. But I sense perhaps the community thinks I am a lesbian and that's why I'm not going to get married. For me it's fine, it's not my problem so I don't deal with it, I don't have to deal with it. If they say it openly then I can tell them who I am if necessary but it's something that I'm not worried about because they're entitled to what they think, I can't change that.'*

(Rekha, Asian Women's Advisory Project)

Rekha had reached the age of 37 and although she had not ruled out marriage, she had chosen to leave it until she felt ready. Although within the community she was thought to be a lesbian and therefore a threat, she specifically resisted marriage because of this false accusation. Her decision not to marry was simply to confound the accusation. The threat of lesbianism to Asian culture has been portrayed on film. Although negative representations of women are evident in Hindi films, they do not necessarily remain within the 'Bollywood' genre that is widely available within the South Asian diaspora in Britain. Precisely because film as a popular medium provides many opportunities for representations, there is scope for alternatives. However, the alternatives come to be regarded as dangerous to the status quo. Consequently, the opposition to alternative representations of femininity and sexuality have had a hostile reception, not from the viewing public but from the guardians of 'Indian culture', the Hindutva movement (the Hindu Right).

Hindutva re-asserts patriarchy and the construction of 'the good Hindu woman', set against modernity and the liberal theory of rights. The interpretation and promise of equality has led to the policing of women's sexuality in India, duplicated in religious revivalism in Britain (Sudbury, 1996; Patel, 1997). Policing in such a way has led to violent campaigns against anything which is



deemed to be against Indian culture, for example the celebration of St. Valentine's Day, beauty pageants or the depiction of alternative sexualities such as lesbianism in cultural spaces provided by films such as *Fire* (Kapur, 2000). It has also led to the policing dress codes for women, with the modest traditional attire favoured against western influenced dress. Men escape such restrictions because the clothing rules for men allow them access to more western style clothes. The following is an example from India but it nevertheless reiterates the points made by the above interviewees.

The film, *Fire* directed by a South Asian Canadian, Deepa Mehta depicts lesbianism as an alternative sexuality, resulted in violent campaigns across India. The film was thought to be 'against' Indian culture, setting modesty against modernity, reinforced through the influential medium of film (Derne, 2000). In the article 'Too Hot to Handle: The Cultural Politics of Fire', Ratna Kapur (2000) examines the impact of the film on the definition of culture through the responses by the Hindu Right, lesbian and feminist groups. She suggests the idea of a sexual subaltern whose sexuality has brought about sexual, familial and cultural fractures. Kapur refers to the destabilizing effects of sexual agency within the family and how it can be understood and concludes by stating:

The story of *Fire*, as well as its plot, challenges the dominant narrative of Indian culture and sexuality, and provides a new and unsteady location from which to understand both. *Fire* is not simply about culture, nor about speech nor about sexual preference. Indeed it involves a complicated intersection of all these issues.

(Kapur, 2000:62)



Sexuality as a site of agency, as depicted in the film *Fire* has posed a threat to the Asian community. This is particularly relevant when it concerns the behaviour of women. As 'carriers of tradition and culture' (Gillespie, 1995:80), discussed earlier, women can bring shame and dishonour to their families and communities. However, it is precisely when South Asian women have displayed behaviour which is contrary to that which is expected (stereotypical 'squeaky-clean' image), then political activity becomes crucial in challenging the stereotypes (Siddiqui, 2000: 89). The following participant recognizes the importance of political activity:

*'I'm very optimistic that things change positively but the commitment has to be there. I think a lot of groups, Asian lesbian and gay groups are doing a lot more, for example, there is now an organisation called SHAKTI. [...] It's sort of getting there. It's not an issue that we have actually looked at in our organisation because it's very, it's very much hidden still.'*  
(Pardeep, Asian Women's Project)

Organizations such as SHAKTI have been set up specifically for lesbian and bisexual South Asian women. Alongside this there are also other groups such as 'Kiss' set up in 1999 who meet regularly at The Glass Bar in Euston (Kawale, 2003). These groups go some way in challenging South Asian women being seen only as heterosexual, inferior or exoticized but as women with agency in their choice of sexuality. To utilize 'choice' as a form of agency is exercising the right to choose a particular lifestyle. Thus South Asian women, in choosing a lesbian sexual identity, choose to express a *subjugated* sexual identity, i.e. in preference to the dominant heterosexual identity. Indeed choice may also mean satisfaction of personal desires at the expense of other people (Weeks, 1995). However political activity is crucial to maintaining the choice and women involved in fighting for this right can be regarded as active agents within

organizations, to promote social change. Social change refers to attitudes, behaviour and practices of the Asian community with reference to a range of practices such as marriage and sexuality.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted gender relations within the 'South Asian community', and has explored the associated concepts such as oppression and patriarchy in their universal application. Through an examination of cultural interpretations and the experiences of the participants, the extent and variation of patriarchal control, the role of family and the 'community' is revealed. I have shown how recognizing the dynamic nature of cultural processes is crucial to understanding South Asian women's experiences. I have also illustrated how underlying social and cultural factors have contributed to essentialist constructions of South Asian women. Although it has been recognized that South Asian women can be viewed as 'carriers of tradition and culture' (Gillespie, 1995), I argue that South Asian women are active agents in challenging sexist and oppressive practices. This goes beyond understanding South Asian women's experiences as the result of living between two cultures of culture conflict (Watson, 1977).

Through the appropriation of cultural identifications, South Asian women have been able to claim an ethnic identity to organize around to instigate social change within the community. In taking up issues such as forced marriage and domestic violence, South Asian women have also asserted their right to a sexual identity and education, and freedom from 'shame', 'honour', and community surveillance. Through the constructs of the 'good' woman and the



'bad' woman, I have illuminated the internalization of female stereotypes within the Asian community. Although stereotypes have been shown to be prevalent, the concept of 'rights' within the idea of citizenship has also enabled South Asian to be viewed as autonomous beings within a polity or community. It is through the political activism (agency) of Asian women that relevant issues such as forced marriage and honour killings have been placed onto the political agenda.

The two issues of sexuality and marriage demonstrate the difficulties and also the negotiations in their rejection of stereotyping, discourses of femininity and acceptable behaviour, and different subject positions. They have also brought to the fore, an appreciation of women's agency by resisting the victim status assigned to South Asian women. In looking at the concept of citizenship in the context of community, I have attempted to connect amongst the plethora of accounts applying this concept to women, how a shift is occurring. In particular it refers to the women's simultaneous use and rejection of cultural explanations and multiculturalist understandings. I have demonstrated the difficulties involved in assigning South Asian women, a subject position with fixed cultural identities. Instead we need to view this as a process whereby a range of identities as defined by themselves can be occupied, and these can be seen as shifting constantly dependent on circumstances. Within this range of identities is religious identity which will be examined in the next chapter.

## NOTES

1. See also Millett, 1977; Barrett, 1980; Hartmann, 1981; Walby, 1986.

2. See Amos and Parmar, 1984 and hooks, 1984.

3. Arranged marriage is discussed in the Labour Government's White Paper 'Secure Borders, Safe Havens' (2002).



4. The case of Shakeela Naz, the mother who murdered her daughter Rukshana for an affair resulting in pregnancy (Jason Burke, *The Observer*, Sunday 8 October 2000).

5. See (a) Mason-John, V. (ed.) (1995) *Talking Back: Lesbians of African and Asian Descent Speak Out*, London: Cassell. (b) Ratti, R. (ed.) (1993) *A Lotus of Another Colour: An Unfolding of the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Experience*, Boston: Alyson. (c) Bisexual Anthology Collective (eds.) (1995) *Plural Desires: Writing Bisexual Women's Realities*, Toronto: Sister Vision Black Women and Women of Colour Press, (d) Khan, S. (1991) *Khush: A SHAKTI Report*, Camden: Camden Council, (e) Carmen, Gail and Pratibha (1984) 'Becoming Visible: Black Lesbian Discussions', *Feminist Review*, July, No.17, pp.53-74.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conceptualizing the Uneasy Relationship of Religion to Political Agency**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter examines how South Asian women who have appropriated religious sanctions to achieve rights assert identity and agency. In particular, I have focused on the role of Islam<sup>1</sup> as a religious identity in some women's lives. The rationale for this focus is the involvement of a number of participants in Islamic based organizations. Although Muslim women are also active in secular organizations in the struggle for equality and freedom, it is predominantly Muslim women who are involved in non-secular organizations. This is evident in the narratives of Muslim women involved in religious organizations. To contextualize the narratives, to compare the significance of religion in women's lives, and to demonstrate tensions in the narratives, I will also include Hindu and Sikh women working in secular organizations. What I will show in this chapter is the ambivalent and contradictory nature of religious discourse, particularly in the construction of political identity. In this way, I explore the paradoxical relationship between women and religious based activism (agency).

#### **The Re-Assertion of Religious Identities**

Women's activism and politicized religion is not a new phenomenon, Chapter Three highlighted the role of women in the Hindutva movement in India. The re-assertion of religious identities on the Indian subcontinent serves to illustrate the increased popularity of religion-based politics and its ability to mobilize women, and communal violence (Jeffrey and Basu, 1998). Religious ideologies such as Hindutva play an important part in shaping the identities and activities

of women. South Asian women's agency is at times constructed through a religious and cultural identification with being Hindu, Muslim or Sikh. Such religious identities have been politicized at the international level with the reverberations of events occurring on the Indian subcontinent, being felt in Britain (Alexander, 2000). This is expressed by Shaheeda who dealt with communal violence through her organization and her role as a barrister:

*'There seems to be more gang warfare based on religion. Sikhs against Muslims [...] we invite women to teach their sons and themselves that they will end up behind bars and harm their education if this hatred continues. It is difficult to say whether we will be successful but we hold sessions every fortnight'.*

(Shaheeda, Muslim Women's' Organization)

Examples of communal violence on the Indian subcontinent include the Hindutva movement, which is anti-Muslim and anti-Christian (Sarkar and Butalia, 1995), and the Sikh movement for an independent state, which is anti-Hindu (Puar, 1996). In connection with the resurgence of Islam there is Islamism, the placing of Islam politically at the centre of one's identity (Sayyid, 1997:17). The increasing popularity of religious identities within a 'fundamentalist' perspective draws on identities primarily based in religion and feelings of nationalism, pride, and cultural preservation. This has been a cause of concern and anxiety for feminists and those on the political Left. The resurgence of religious identities raises questions about the benefits they hold for women.

In the heterogeneous and diverse nature of cultural identities, the production of religious identities within the diaspora can be regarded as a continuous and transformative process (Hall, 1990). Amongst the religious identities



constructed in the diaspora, it is the Muslim identity that has had the highest profile nationally. Being Muslim has emerged as a signifier of cultural otherness and developed as a key marker of difference. Within racial discourse in Britain, being Muslim has proved to be a powerful political identity in promoting separate religious schools and religious discrimination. The Muslim identity has also been shown in the shortcomings of the blasphemy laws. This was evident in 1989, when the publication of *The Satanic Verses* resulted in acts of defiance by Muslims on a global level, including book burning in Bradford and public demonstrations in Pakistan and India. It culminated in Ayatollah Khomeini issuing the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie. John Solomos comments on the effect of these actions:

The Rushdie Affair reinforced public interest about the role of fundamentalism among sections of the Muslim communities in various localities and gave a new life to debates about the issue of cultural differences and processes of integration and assimilation.

(Solomos, 1993:222)

Since the Rushdie Affair, other more recent events have intensified the debate on fundamentalism referred to above. The demonization of Muslims (P.Lewis, 1994) on a global level has been magnified by the attack on the World Trade Centre in September 2001, the 'war against terrorism' and The Iraq War in 2003. In Britain the disturbances in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley involving, among others, young Muslim men has also contributed significantly to the racialization of cultural and religious identities. Muslims in the diaspora are continuously identified through the 'Muslim community', resulting in homogenization. The perceived otherness of Muslims, based on (corporeal) skin colour and religious signifiers emerge as significant factors in political

discourse. The setting of Britishness against the Muslim 'Other' resurrects historical notions of the barbaric Muslim, with Muslim women depicted as oppressed by patriarchy, signified by the wearing of the *hijab* or the veil. It is this broad context and through the narratives of women in my research that the chapter will explore how Muslim women view a religious identity as a route to equality. I will also explore why fundamentalism has been applied predominantly to Islam, whether women's political activity is based on Islamism, and the extent to which religious based political activity can be regarded as a form of feminism. For this purpose, I will be referring to political advances made by women in Islamic states and examine whether similarities can be drawn with the British situation.

### **Religion, Tradition and Equality**

Subsumed within the question of national identity and the media's attack on Islamic fundamentalism we can locate the social positioning of Muslim women. Although women's groups such as 'Women Against Fundamentalism' have been involved in challenging stereotypical images of Asian and Muslim women (Solomos, 1993), feminists in both Britain and the Indian subcontinent have shown great apprehension about the consequences of fundamentalist movements for women's rights. They have noted the re-assertion of patriarchy and the policing of women's sexuality (Sudbury, 1998; V. Patel, 1994). Moreover this reassertion is often achieved in the name of cultural nationalist or antiracist discourse or politics. With reference to the British situation, Pragna Patel (1997) asserts:

Women's bodies and minds are the battleground for the preservation and 'purity' of religious and communal identities. So the role of women as signifiers and transmitters of identity within the family becomes crucial.

(P. Patel, 1997:26)

Women within the private sphere have become the focus for the reproduction of religious ideologies, with the wearing of the *hijab* symbolizing a political identity and resistance to racism. In Britain, although secular women's organizations have openly challenged certain versions of religion and maintained an active struggle against oppression, they tend not to grapple with the ways in which some women view their liberation within or alongside religious affiliations. Secular organizations need to acknowledge that some women use religion as an emancipatory tool because it forms an important facet of their identity and provides a space in which to demonstrate agency. The complexity is the relationship between religion and women's agency, which has been shown to lead to right wing activity, for example the Hindutva movement in India (Sarkar and Butalia, 1995). The question here is, to what extent can religion be regarded as a tool for liberating women? As the women in my research will illustrate, the answers to such questions are complex and difficult.

The challenge for South Asian women in secular and non-secular organizations is to bring about social change while still being members of these organizations. In their attempts to bring about social change, South Asian women have to grapple with the idea that they are seen as repositories of 'tradition'. Many writers have stressed that women are often used as markers of tradition and culture highlighting the preoccupation of South Asian communities with the position of women, their role in the family and community and religion (Puwar



and Raghuram, 2003; P. Patel, 1997)<sup>2</sup> If women are required to preserve religious, familial and ethnic integrity, how can women challenge the practices that subjugate them yet are validated in terms of such integrity? How do they initiate change without being regarded as disloyal for adopting what are branded as western values and attitudes (Tohidi, 1994; Najmabobi, 1991)? If one aim of social change is to challenge oppressive practices, we need to investigate how for example, Muslim women regard their social positioning *and* how the Koran can be used to promote equality between men and women. Mumtaz, the founder of a Muslim women's organization, comments (further to her statement in Chapter Two) on women's oppression within the Muslim community. She does so in terms that counterpoise 'culture' and 'authentic' religious teaching:

*'Our men are very domineering, they oppress women [...] The Koran teaches that women are equal. Our culture tells us that women are not equal. The Islamic way is for women to learn and gain knowledge. The Koran is written in Arabic, therefore it is our duty to learn it. There was no opportunity to learn Arabic, no place for them to go to learn the Koran, the rules. Our women do not understand Arabic. The Islamic way is for women to learn and gain knowledge. Islam does not say sit in the corner quietly and don't do any work. Islam preaches against becoming a burden in society, one should stand on one's feet, to have confidence.'*

(Mumtaz, Muslim Women's Organization)

Mumtaz's involvement in a Muslim women's organization was specifically for the purpose of education, for women to learn Arabic. She recognizes the oppressive nature of culture not religion, and asserts how women, through knowledge of the Koran in Arabic can enhance their social positioning (equality), rather than accept interpretations made by men. Mumtaz also distinguishes religion from the principles laid out in the Koran that can 'liberate' women from oppression and disempowerment through the acquisition of

appropriate religious and symbolic knowledge (Bano, 1999). Thus some Muslim women have been able to use their religious loyalties to argue for equality and contest religious orthodoxies. The ability to use religion in this manner, as shown in Islamic societies, shifts the positioning of women as the most socially oppressed group (Kandiyoti, 1988). Yet Mumtaz comments on oppression and Muslim women's lack of confidence to challenge it:

*'These women when they are oppressed, they are afraid, they lack the confidence or the methods to challenge this.'*  
(Mumtaz, Muslim Women's Organization)

Mumtaz views the oppression of Muslim women as a form of disempowerment, compounded further by depression. To challenge oppression and to demand equality, she regards knowledge of the Koran as an emancipatory tool for Muslim women. If the Koran is regarded in such a manner, why are Muslim women often regarded as the most oppressed of South Asian women? The difficulty is the contemporary use of the concept 'Islamic fundamentalism' which plays a central role in viewing Islam as a patriarchal religion and in ascribing an inferior status to women (Said, 1993). Evidence usually points to the 'fanaticism' of Islamic movements. In Islamic societies where Islamic leaders hold traditional Islamic beliefs, women are under pressure to wear the *chador*, to relinquish their rights, and to limit themselves to the private sphere of the home and family. The following section will look at the ways in which fundamentalism has become associated with Islam, the debate concerning the use of 'fundamentalism' as an analytical category (as used in feminist understandings), and the replacement of fundamentalism with the notion of



Islamism. Abderrahim Lamchichi raises the contradictions of Islamism in *Le Monde diplomatique*:

The traditional Islamist political parties have a different attitude from the radicals and neo-fundamentalists, who fear women as a source of temptation and are repelled by the Western way of life. Some prominent Islamist men subscribe to a patriarchal and sexist ideology but reformers in the movement have a more complex view. Although they insist that men and women must not mix and that women must wear the *hijab* in public, they are not, in principle, against Muslim women having rights and exercising responsibilities within the limits of their concept of morality.

(Lamchichi, 2003: 15)

Indeed in many Islamic countries women have claimed their right to paid employment and political office while defending the principles of their religion. This includes rejecting western lifestyles and the accommodation of Islamist views on the home and family. While 'emancipation under the banner of religion' (Lamchichi, 2003) may be a way forward for women in Islamic societies, do women living in Britain need to follow the same path instead of appealing to a democratic notion of human rights? The following section therefore also includes a mapping of Islam, its association with fundamentalism and the role of Islamism.

### **Mapping Islam: Fundamentalism and Islamism**

The section is an exploration into the ways in which fundamentalism has become associated with Islam and the difficulties arising from regarding Islam as a monolithic<sup>3</sup> religion. Islam cannot be regarded as a monolithic religion because of the Sunni and Shia versions that Chris Harman comments on:



After Mohammed's death in 632 AD, just two years after Islam had conquered Mecca, dissension broke out between the followers of Abu Bakr, who became the first Caliph (successor of Mohammed as leader of Islam), and Ali, husband of the prophet's daughter Fatima. Ali claimed that some of Abu Bakr's rulings were oppressive. Dissension grew until rival Muslim armies fought each other at the battle of Camel resulting in 10,000 deaths. It was out of this dissension that the separation of the Sunni and Shia versions of Islam arose. This was but the first of many splits [...] But even mainstream Islam is not, in its popular form at least, a homogeneous set of beliefs [...] So popular Islam often includes cults of local saints or of holy relics even though orthodox Islam regards such practices as sacrilegious idolatry. And Sufi brotherhoods flourish which, while not constituting a formal rival to mainstream Islam, put an emphasis on mystical and magical experience which many fundamentalists find objectionable. (Harman, 1994:6)

Within the Shia and Sunni versions of Islam, attitudes towards women have varied with the more positive attitude of Shia law, regarding women's position in divorce and inheritance. For the Shia, a woman, Fatima (the prophet Mohammed's daughter), is revered along with four other figures and women are actively involved in religious functions. For the Sunni, five males including the prophet Mohammed are revered, with women's inheritance half or nothing in comparison to men (Ahmed, 2002). In his examination of the history of Islam, Akbar Ahmed (2002) claims that women had many rights conferred on them, those of education, inheritance and divorce. In addition Muslim women have also been leaders of armies, acclaimed artists and Sufi saints. Ahmed goes on to comment:

This somewhat stylized picture is far removed from the lowly situation of women in our [present] times. What factor, what catastrophe, took place to alter the status of women so drastically? The answer lies to a large degree in colonialism. The impact of colonialism from the last century onwards affected society externally and internally in the most extreme manner. Men retreated

into the shell of rigid customs and sterile ritual, finding a form of security there. They also forced their women to hide behind *burkhas* (shuttlecock veils) and remain invisible in the courtyards of their homes. The stereotype of Oriental females as chattels and playthings was formed. It was a bad time for Islam, a time of retreat. When the European masters began to leave from the middle of the twentieth century Muslim women were to be glimpsed still in various degrees of deprivation and subjugation. They still have to recover.

(A.Ahmed, 2002:185)

In his work on the changes in Islam that have occurred over time, Ahmed offers a sympathetic account of the role of women in Islamic societies. He argues the sexual division of labour was exaggerated due to the imposition of different values by the colonialists, leading to the destruction of already existing values amongst the 'native' populations of colonies. He goes on to argue that changing the status of women (in terms of economics, education, hereditary rights, and other privileges), from an 'inferior class' to one of equality cannot be achieved through a return to the 'early ideal of Islam' (A.Ahmed, 2002:185). He comments:

The position of women in Muslim society mirrors the destiny of Islam: when Islam is secure and confident so are its women; when Islam is threatened and under pressure so, too, are they.

(Ahmed, 2002:184)

The insecurity and the treatment of women are evident in Muslim women scholars' accounts and is something that Muslim men disapprove of. Ahmed explains this hostility by stating that Muslim men carry with them in their minds, an idealized picture of the Muslim woman and man, with their rights to education and inheritance but also as 'modest, pious and caring for the family' (Ahmed, 2002:184). The conditions that Muslim women live under vary from



one country to another, however their position is determined from birth. The feminist Egyptian scholar Nawal El Saadawi writes on the status of a girl child:

From the day of her birth to the moment of death, a question will continue to haunt her: 'Why?' Why is it that preference is given to her brother, despite the fact that they are the same, or that she may even be superior to him in many ways, or at least in some aspects? As a child, I saw one of my paternal aunts being submitted to resounding slaps on her face because she had given birth to a third daughter rather than a male child, and I overheard her husband threatening her with divorce if she ever gave birth to a female child again instead of giving him a son.

(El Saadawi, 1982:)

Viewing the birth of a daughter as a disaster is not the monopoly of Muslim society, it is something that is prevalent in many cultures around the world. Chapter Six describes the subjugation and discrimination of women in Indian society where 'parents view her [girl child] as a liability' (Pillai, 1995:4). The common themes of liability, i.e. the honour and shame which women carry resonate in a range of patriarchal societies. Liability carried to the extreme is in the form of 'honour crime', not uncommon in Britain (Southall Black Sisters, 2001). The contradictions in using religion for political agency and the ambiguity for women around the re-assertion of religious identities are highlighted in this study.

A number of important questions are raised by women's political activity based on religion: does it reveal the subversive nature of women's agency and can women gain full rights using religion? Can Islam be effectively used to emancipate women from their subjugated positions? If Islam is consistently linked to fundamentalism, can it dissociate itself from the erosion of women's rights, for example in Afghanistan? Furthermore, does the concept 'Islamism'



imply a positive appraisal of Islam for women? Exploring the ways in which the concepts of fundamentalism and Islamism are used will serve to uncover some of the contradictions present in explanations of religion as an emancipatory tool. The following is therefore an exploration of the two concepts, 'fundamentalism' and 'Islamism' and whether a distinction can be made between the two.

## **Fundamentalism**

Firstly, let us consider the term 'fundamentalism'. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1990) describes it as a 'strict maintenance of ancient or fundamental doctrines of any religion especially Islam'. This description specifically identifies Islam as fundamentalist with a noted absence of for example, Christian fundamentalism. The Iranian revolution of 1978-79 marks the watershed in the domination by Islamic movements of Middle Eastern countries. There have been many terms associated with these movements but 'fundamentalism' has become the most used. Islamic movements have thus become associated with the term. However Islamic fundamentalism continues to confound academics as it can be regarded as both revolutionary and reactionary. It is revolutionary as many countries in the Middle East have fought imperialism. Simultaneously, they have oppressed women with reference to their rights. In the article 'Islamic Fundamentalism – oppression and revolution', Phil Marshall comments:

Islamic fundamentalism presents a puzzle. Here is a movement with a deeply reactionary ideology, hostile to women's rights and all socialist ideas. But here too is a movement viewed by large numbers of the most oppressed people in the Middle East as their champion – as the most determined anti-imperialist force in the region. [...] The [fundamentalist] movement is riddled with contradictions.

(Marshall, 1988:1)

Despite the difficulties associated with Islamic fundamentalism, Marshall retains the concept 'Islamic fundamentalism' in preference to 'fundamentalism', 'Islamicism', 'Islamic activism', 'Islamic radicalism' or 'militant Islam' (Marshall, 1988:2). Through a Marxist approach, Marshall also identifies the dual nature of religion; the power it wields to oppress people *and* how it is used to give voice to the oppressed. I will be examining this dual nature and I argue that the complexity of the relationship between religion and agency can be identified through conceptualizing it both as radical *and* conservative. This is a more complex understanding of religion as it goes beyond the notion that religious ideas 'can stimulate as well as stupefy' (Siegal, 1986:28). For feminists, religious fundamentalism is a category of analysis and in *Refusing Holy Orders*, Gita Saghal and Nira Yuval-Davis clarify the meanings attached to fundamentalism:

Unlike the widely held British stereotype, fundamentalism is not peculiar to Islam. [...] It was the Salman Rushdie affair and Muslim's mass demonstrations in protest - not only against *The Satanic Verses* and its author, but also against the ways in which the British state privileges Christianity - which put the issue of fundamentalism at the centre of British politics. However, different fundamentalist movements - Christian, Jewish, Sikh and Hindu, as well as Muslim - have been growing in Britain during the last few years, even before the Rushdie affair. The term 'fundamentalism', especially in the way it has been used by the media around the Rushdie affair, has become so confused with abusive labelling of Muslims as 'the Barbaric Other' that it has been suggested that the term should be dispensed with altogether. [...] While struggling against anti-Muslim racism, it is important to realize that fundamentalism is a much wider phenomenon which cuts across religions and cultures, and with which we must engage.

(Saghal and Yuval-Davis, 1992:3)

Fundamentalism therefore is something that cuts across cultures and religions.



Despite the assertion that fundamentalism is part of every religion, it remains a highly contested concept. Jan Pieterse describes it as a polemical term:

[...] originally a proud self-advertising label for anti-modernism; next it served as a popular pejorative category, representing an essentialized anti-modernism; and now it is being used for general target practice [...] Thus in the West, Islam nowadays tends to be popularly equated with Islamism and fundamentalism; little distinction is made among Islamic traditionalists, neo-traditionalists, radical and militant Islamists, while liberal and reformist currents in Islam are ignored.

(Pieterse, 1994:2)

Pieterse argues that feminism's challenge to patriarchy hidden within religion is appropriate. However, it is unwise to challenge patriarchy under the banner of opposition to 'fundamentalism'. The effect of doing so is the alienation of those women who participate in religious movements. As Haleh Afshar comments, with reference to the impact on Muslim women's lives:

Women whether they have wished it or not, have been required to reflect the religious commitment of the group in their attire and behaviour as well as in most aspects of their lives. This has not been a painless or static process. At different times and places Muslim women have come to different arrangements and have struck different bargains with the patriarchal structures within which they find themselves in.

(Afshar, 1992:129)

The contradictory nature of religion as simultaneously radical and conservative is realized when women strike bargains with patriarchy in a context where other options are denied. The bargains involve a move towards equality through resistance of oppressive practices. Despite this, Islamic fundamentalism continues to be associated with stereotypes, such as 'veiled Muslim women and



bearded (Muslim) men, book burners and suicide bombers' (Sayyid, 1997:7-9). The question is whether 'fundamentalism' can be replaced by a more politically 'neutral' term. Bobby Sayyid (1997) argues against Saghal and Yuval-Davis' (1992) conceptualization of fundamentalism and suggests that a 're-contextualization' is necessary. I will argue for the importance of retaining the term fundamentalism as exemplified through the work of feminists who question the role of 'Islamic feminism'. The grounds for this argument will be spelt out later in the chapter.

Sayyid's argument is based on three features of fundamentalism put forward by Saghal and Yuval-Davis, (1992). *Firstly*, the exertion of control over women's bodies is thought to be a characteristic of all fundamentalisms, ranging from Islamic fundamentalists to the Christian Coalition in the United States. The *second* feature is the threat to fundamentalists by 'pluralist systems of thought' resulting in a movement backwards into traditionalism (Sayyid, 1997:11). *Thirdly*, fundamentalism is characterized by an intimate connection between politics and religion. Sayyid (1997) argues *firstly* that control over women and men's bodies is a role of governmentality and that patriarchy applies to all societies; it is not only applicable to Islam. In connection with the *second* feature, Sayyid argues that Islamic fundamentalism is not a move towards traditionalism. Instead the interpretations of Islam in Islamism are new and creative, not just strongly held views represented as 'the truth'. Sayyid goes on to explain that truth is relative and that many groups have claimed to represent the truth, from communism to Nazism. *Thirdly*, Sayyid claims that Saghal and Yuval-Davis' (1992) analysis of fundamentalism is based on an inappropriate specific cultural understanding of the European Enlightenment. On the basis of

this critique, he proposes the use of the concept 'Islamism'<sup>4</sup> It is to Islamism and its influential role as an emancipatory tool for women that we turn to next.

## **Islamism**

Sayyid's (1997) conceptualization of Islamism is as follows:

In my understanding an Islamist is someone who places her or his Muslim identity at the centre of her or his political practice. That is, Islamists are people who use the language of Islamic metaphors to think through their political destinies, those who see in Islam their political future [...] Islamists are no more (or less) identical in their beliefs and motives than postmodern bourgeois liberals or socialists or nationalists. Islam is a political discourse and, as such, is akin to other political discourses such as socialism or liberalism [...] Islam is a discourse that attempts to centre Islam within the political order. Islamism can range from the assertion of a Muslim subjectivity to a full blooded attempt to reconstruct society on Islamic principles.

(Sayyid, 1997:17)

The range covered by Islamism is from an individual to a polity but at the core of his argument is the idea of the contextual and contingent character of contemporary Islamic discourse. In this sense its temporal sweep is the now or present and the future, and its ideological or discursive 'character' is akin to that of other sociopolitical discourses with which it competes to interpellate subjects under its banner. Thus, whilst the scope of this research is not to understand Islamism as a focus for reconstructing society, however, it is helpful to use it in connection with the concepts 'identity' and 'subjectivity' with reference to women's agency. If Islamism connotes a central Muslim identity, the women who adopt it are able to appropriate aspects of religion that are considered favourable in their claim for rights. It can therefore be regarded as a form of agency, whereby women are actively involved in the struggle to change their



positioning in society. This features in the narratives of the women involved in religious based organizations. Thus, woman can be involved in a process that uses religion as a vehicle to respond to racism (demonization of Islam) and sexism (oppressive cultural practices). The importance of an identity becomes clearer when it is politicized with the agency of women 'justified' through religious mandates. The obvious distinction between Islamic societies and Muslim women living in Britain is the element of 'choice'. In Britain, Muslim women can 'choose' to assert a religious identity in response to racism and sexism. In my research I have found that amongst some of the women working in religious based organizations, religion plays a central role in their lives:

*'Our religion is a way of life, everything that we do. We celebrate Eid and this is religion. We pray five times and this was difficult in the Asian Women's Centre. We were not allowed religious activity in the other Asian women's group. The activities of dancing and singing which is part of their (Hindu and Sikh) religion, is against our religion (Islam). We are forbidden music, this is the difference. Our constitution is the Koran. The Koran means it is the guide, it gives us guidance until our death. We felt disadvantaged in this group, we were the losers'.*

(Mumtaz, Muslim Women's Project)

Mumtaz's conception of religion supports the Islamist notion of a central religious identity linked to the struggle for centrality in wider political relations (Sayyid, 1997). She also believed that the moral and religious sanctions were being compromised through the involvement in a mixed religious group, the Asian Women's Centre. The separation from this centre into a purely Muslim organization allowed the Muslim women to pursue their way of life through Islam. However as a consequence it also promoted, in effect, a hierarchy of women through their adherence to religious principles, with Hindu and Sikh ranked below that of Muslim women. The differences in adherence to religion



are demonstrated through some women regarding it as a private not institutionalized act. For example Anu is a Hindu woman who had initially refused to answer questions on religion. Commenting on the role of religion and the relationship to work, she stated:

*'I am not a fanatic, sorry, I am a Hindu! I don't see why organizations have to provide facilities for praying in one type of religion, one should pray at home. After all, my job is as a community worker, not to promote religion or by saying that I have to pray at 12 o'clock'.*

(Anu, Asian Women's Organization).

Anu is able to position other religions as fanatical and throw into doubt the centrality of a Hindu identity by drawing a boundary between the public and the private, positioning herself as a private religious person, working in a secular organization. Fanaticism for Anu is associated with Islam and her comments were directed at Islam reflecting the notion of Islam seen as an extreme form of religion, associated with fundamentalism. Although Anu at first, had not wanted to talk about religion, she recognized that the client group of the organization was Muslim, mainly women who originate from Bangladesh. In the borough, there are organizations that cater for Muslim women. However, due to differences amongst the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, these women preferred to attend other organizations. This shows that being a Muslim does not necessarily guarantee solidarity. If being Muslim does not guarantee solidarity, then the Islamic identity in Islamism is subject to variations. The next section therefore examines understandings of Islam and considers whether it can be seen as a 'master signifier' (Sayyid, 1997:46).

## Islam as a 'Master Signifier'

In his discussion of Islam being constructed as a master signifier for Muslims, Bobby Sayyid uses Edward Said's conceptualization of Islam and Islamism:

Far from being a coherent movement, the 'return to Islam' embodies a number of political actualities. For the United States it represents an image of disruption to be resisted at some times, encouraged at others. We speak of the anticommunist Saudi Muslims, of the valiant Muslim rebels of Afghanistan, of 'reasonable' Muslims like Sadat, the Saudi royal family and Zia al-Haqq. Yet we also rail at Khomeini's Islamic militants and Qaddafi's Islamic 'Third Way', and by our morbid fascination with 'Islamic punishment' (as administered by Khalkali) we paradoxically strengthen its power as an authority-maintaining device. In Egypt the Muslim brotherhood, in Saudi Arabia the Muslim militants who took the Medina mosque, in Syria the Islamic Brotherhoods and Vanguards who oppose the Baath regime, in Iran the Mujahideen, as well as the Fedayeen and the liberals; these make up a small part of what is an adversal current though we know very little about it. In addition, the various Muslim nationalities whose identities have been blocked in various post-colonial states clamour for *their* Islam. And beneath all this [...] surge still more varieties of Islam, many of them claiming to guide their members back to the 'true' Islam.

(Said, 1981:60)

The orientalist depicted and rejected Islam as a monolithic or homogeneous religion. In contrast, anti-orientalists have dissolved Islam as an analytical category. Sayyid (1997) critiques the challenge by the anti-orientalists who claim that, because of the variety of contexts in which Islam has been used, it can no longer be thought of as a sustainable concept. Sayyid argues that the anti-orientalist argument reverses the centrality of Islam in orientalist accounts. The anti-orientalist account decentres Islam, reducing it to its basic components and, therefore, 'the space left vacant by the dissolution of Islam as a serious concept is occupied by a series of 'Little Islams'' (Sayyid, 1997:38). The 'Little



Islams' are then displaced into two categories: ethnicity and ideology. Islam as an ethnic identity is problematic and Sayyid points to the confusing link between the two and whether Islam can also be considered to be a marker of ethnicity. Sayyid argues that ethnicity is secondary to being a Muslim and with reference to Islam as an ideology he contends that it does not simply act to conceal structural inequalities. He goes on to argue that Islam can also be used to form identities and interests. On the two approaches, Sayyid comments:

What unites these two approaches is their attempt to locate Islam in the contemporary world but, at the same time, displace it to the terrain of surface effects, where various signifieds (ethnicity, culture, class, etc) bear the burden of explanation. What anti-orientalism produces is a series of 'little Islams' reflecting the various economic, ethnic and social factors of the variety of Muslim communities.

(Sayyid, 1997:39)

Sayyid proposes theorizing Islam as a master signifier because it is conceptualized by Islamists as 'inter-discursive' and by defining Islam as '*din* (faith), as *dunya* (complete way of life), and as *dawla* (a state or political order)' (Sayyid, 1997:47). Islamists therefore are able to unify the Islams in different discourses to produce an abstract master signifier. This is not to deny that Islam can manifest in many different political movements but rather that its contemporary capacity to cohere disparate constituencies around it and stand as the core of a unifying identity makes it contingent yet profoundly powerful. Thus, in this chapter, I am using the term Islam through an understanding of it as an abstract master signifier. It is within this framework that I draw on the political activities of Muslim women in Britain and Islamic societies. However, I also use it to highlight the ambiguities of using Islam and Islamism as a tool for women's liberation.



## Islam: Oppressive or Liberatory?

In Islamic countries, it was believed that a natural progression after colonialism would be a modernization and liberalization of society. Islam is considered to have contributed to a 'regeneration' of society and Islamism has proved to be a strong force and has sometimes included restrictions being imposed on women – their movement in public spaces and the imposition of *purdah*. Politically, the left has been thrown into confusion over how to deal with the rise of Islamism. Two views of Islamism have been put forward, one that regards it as a fascist movement and the other that regards it as anti-imperialist or progressive. For this research, it is the position of women that we have to examine and in effect, Islamism has not granted full rights to women. The contradiction lies in firstly viewing Islamism as traditional because as a new force, it does not reject modern science, industry or technology. Islamism is thus mistakenly regarded as traditional, instead it has been put forward that it should be thought of as a kind of hybrid consisting of traditions and containing aspects of modern life (Sayyid, 1997). If Islamism can be thought of as a discourse of modernity or even postmodernity, does it grant rights to women?

The most important feature of Muslim women's support for Islam is how they are able to assert and maintain a religious identity, and whether this can be regarded as a form of subversion. Subversion implies that Muslim women are able to gain some power in traditional structures in order to change and transform oppressive structures within. The women involved in such action are not claiming a central role but seeking a redefinition of what it means to be human from the margins (Spivak, 1987). As the following participants' narratives will show, women working within a religious framework appropriate

vocabulary usually associated with feminist and left wing emancipatory movements in their efforts to overcome oppression and to gain rights. The women in my research played a significant role in the setting up of distinctive organizations and whilst it is not possible to transfer their views onto 'Muslim' women as a homogeneous category, it is possible to draw out their motivation for using religion as an identity to organize around.

Although women's involvement in religious movements signals a change in their social status, popular conceptions in the West continue to regard Islam as an oppressive religion, particularly in its treatment of women. Moghissi (1999) makes an interesting observation on this, firstly that Islamists regard women as dangerous through the possession of 'seductive power', which needs to be controlled to guard against 'satanic lust' that can be roused by the simplest of gestures, for example a smile. The Islamists' role, according to Moghissi is to act as custodians of 'women's purity'. She points out the consequences of extreme surveillance:

The Islamic principle of *amr-l bi marouf va nahy-l az monkar* (ordering good and preventing evil) rules out any recognition and respect for the concept of individual right to choice and equal protection under the law. In this context, the clutches of the guardians of the Islamic *Shari'a* are felt in every aspect of women's (and men's) lives [...] What are the psychological impulses and mental frames in Islamic cultures which tolerate or even licence the violent disciplining by men of sexual and moral conduct? These questions, in the end, must merge with the problematic rise of Islamic fundamentalist movements in contemporary Middle Eastern and North African societies.

(Moghissi, 1999: 27-28)

If Islam represents patriarchal oppression, we need to explore why some women regard it as a tool for liberation. Also, if Islam continues to be regarded as alien in its 'mental structures' (Bourdieu, 1993) with reference to the processes that oppress women, we need to consider how women are able to use Islam as a positive form of identification. The women in my research who worked in Muslim organizations were aware of the powers of religious men but were able to negotiate for their rights. On the power wielded by Muslim men Fatima told me

*'Some men, religious men are threatening. They wanted to know why I was supporting the women [...] the community, the mosque and the religious leaders are very powerful'.  
(Fatima, Muslim Women's Organization)*

Fatima found herself bound to the strict rules imposed by men within a Muslim community in Britain. Women who were involved in setting up organizations have to contend with, as the above statement shows, the reaction of Muslim men to women's organizations. The pressures exerted by Muslim men extend to whether they regarded the activities of women within the organization as acceptable. The men wielded power within the community to ensure the compliance of women in the following of religious mandates, and selecting the most appropriate name for the organization. The women's acceptance of men's authority was regarded as necessary in order for organizations to be set up. It is possible to consider the establishment of this organization as a subversive act. Thus Muslim organizations such as the one run by Fatima help women in domestic violence situations by referring them to refuges. Attendance at the classes in this centre also meant that women became more independent because they learned about their rights. As such these are two important



elements of a challenge to gender relations. Commenting on these issues in the setting up of another organization for Muslim women, Fatima said:

*'We went to the Women's Committee and had discussions with them, they were very supportive and the other women in the committee said I should continue [with the Muslim Women's Centre]. I said, "no because all the Muslim men would be upset." So I said, "change the name to the Asian Women's centre'.*  
(Fatima, Muslim Women's Organization)

Fatima had pre-empted men's disapproval of naming the organization as 'Muslim', instead she had opted for the appeal to 'Asianness'. In contradiction to this, another founder of a Muslim women's organization told me that at the time of setting up her organization she (Latifa) was dominated by a powerful Muslim councillor. He had insisted on the name that would make it appear that it was a sister organization to the Muslim Men's organization. Latifa emphasized that originally the organization was created exclusively for the use of Muslims, however, other ethnic and religious groups were encouraged to attend. Her work with people from different religions was verified by the co-operation she received from Jewish councillors:

*'We know the councillors very well, I think again the Jewish people are much better than our Muslim councillors. Our Muslim councillors don't want to listen, believe me. So that's why I'm telling you, don't bring religion into it, just see what kind of person is that. I have no faith in Muslim councillors, honestly I don't hide my feelings. Never hope they will come forward and help you out. It's best if you go to others, they will try their best to help you out'.*  
(Latifa, Muslim Women's Organization)

Latifa's comments speak to the lack of co-operation by Muslim male councillors even though she had followed their advice on the naming of the organization.

Her lack of trust and confidence in Muslim men began during the initial stages of her career. She comments on the lack of professionalism:

*'It's true men are always making trouble for us, in this country also. They don't like it if the woman is getting ahead. I don't know what happens to them always. I think they feel jealous. Honestly because you can judge, you can see from their faces. Once we had a meeting, in the [...] mosque and they were scared to invite me, because I'm the sort of person who says straight away what is right and what is good in my opinion'.*

(Latifa, Muslim Women's Organization)

Muslim men's reactions to Latifa ranged from disapproval about her dress, lack of co-operation with reference to funding, to hostility regarding her organization. The organization provided services for women ranging from a playgroup to services for elderly people and the disabled. Latifa ensured that she worked in close collaboration with other organizations in the borough, including schools. There is also provision made for a girls youth club on Saturday mornings, which is a space for them to discuss issues of concern. Although this is carried out within an Islamist framework, there was still concern amongst the male leaders in mosques. Another woman working in a secular organization also refers to the lack of co-operation displayed by Muslim councillors:

*'I don't know, but a few of them [Muslim councillors] are in powerful positions and what they are trying to do is that they are trying to establish a need. They're basically saying that the organization doesn't cater for Muslim women'.*

(Kanwal, Asian Women's Project)

Opposition to women's organizations can therefore also be framed as *not* providing for Muslim women. Pressure from outside can mean that women are caught in a complex understanding of patriarchal oppression. On the one hand, men oppose Muslim women's organizations unless they can prove their

religious credentials. On the other hand, they accuse secular organizations of not meeting the needs of Muslim women specifically. The Asian women's project that Kanwal was involved in has grown in size and strength, carried out research and uncovered oppressive practices within the South Asian community. Hostility to the organization can have consequences for funding from the local authority budget that voluntary organizations rely on.

Tensions existed between organizations particularly around the traditional approach advocated by Muslim organizations. This was highlighted by Fatima's comments earlier. Another woman working in a secular organization commented on the reaction of the Muslim women towards women who had sought refuge because of domestic violence. Gargi told me that some of the women from her refuge had been sent to classes held at the Muslim women's organization to promote integration and the following is their reaction:

*'Their [Muslim women's organization] approach is really wrong I mean it is a contradiction. In a way they say, "we help the women, we give them training." Yet on the other hand they look upon them as third class citizens by asking them, "why did you leave your home? We don't need you here or we don't want to help." In a way their approach is like that and I thought, "why are you opening the classes for them then?"'*  
(Gargi, Asian Women's Project)

Gargi is referring to the ways in which some Muslim women's organizations have acquired funding for training through their promotion as an organization which would welcome women from other religions. However, they were judgmental and used a traditional approach of reconciliation in connection with domestic violence issues. Consequently those women staying at the refuge refused to participate in the classes. The tensions had not stopped there either



as Gargi indicated. This particular organization had involved the founding members of two Muslim women's organizations, Fatima and Latifa. Both women left due to the infighting between Muslim and Hindu women within the management committee. As a result of this Women's Aid was involved in the running of this organization. Shaheeda, the Muslim barrister, commented further on differences based on religion and proposed the following:

*'We should have a united organization where we assign roles because of our skills instead of fighting amongst ourselves. We should not confine ourselves to small groups with particular ideas, we should have broad objectives which we should try to achieve. So we should have unity so that we have an umbrella organization and have an identity as an Asian organization, a big organization. I am a member of the BAR association and I am proud of it, it gives me a profound identity and I can approach them if I have problems.'*  
(Shaheeda, Muslim Women's Organization)

Shaheeda was not alone in her ideas regarding the setting up of a network, which would bring together Asian women's organizations. The idea had been mooted by various secular organizations, i.e. to have a centralized co-ordinator for women organizations nationally. She said that, although she was not a practising Muslim, she was able to draw on the principles of Islam, thereby suggesting that Islam was important to her but it was not central to her identity.

The principles of Islam are breached however for other Muslim women such as Latifa whose dismay regarding the attitude and behaviour of men towards women is compounded further on the question of marriage. She comments on one case involving a mullah:

*'Even one of the mullahs tried to divorce his wife, with three kids and the fourth one was coming, she was pregnant. All the mullah has to do is to give the fatwa and the divorce is on. I said no divorce, how can you say that? And you can't have a talak because of the baby. The mullah wouldn't listen so I asked my community worker to do something for her.'*

(Latifa, Hackney Muslim Women's Organization)

Latifa's understanding of the status of women in Islam is contradicted by the behaviour of the mullah and her involvement in this case extended to talking to the woman's parents-in-law. She reprimanded them for their actions to take away the house from their daughter-in-law. She also appealed to their religiosity and respectability in the community for such an action to be justifiable. After a period of nine months, the woman in question had learned English and was living with her four children independently from her husband.

Latifa, through her involvement in a religious based project, was able to be critical of religion without rejecting it. Instead she used Islam to criticize the husband's actions towards his wife. The reverence that is supposed to be shown to women in Islam is clearly ignored by some men in their treatment of women. Women such as Latifa who are critical of male interpretations of religious teachings use the organizational infrastructure to create a 'safe' environment from which to mount their critique and support women.

However, being outspoken can hold different consequences in Islamic countries such as Egypt. This is certainly true for women who are categorized as dissidents and punished for being outspoken against Islam and for putting forward the case for women's social and intellectual freedom in Islamic societies. Examples of dissidents include Nawal El Saadawi who was imprisoned by President Sadat for her writings concerning the rights of women and has been subject to state harassment ever since. Saadawi's writings capture the brutality of a system which places less value on the lives of females

(similar to the value placed on the Indian girl child in Chapter Six), normalizes genital mutilation as 'clitoridectomy' and is able to regard a ten year old girl eligible for marriage. El Sadaawi's work exposes the mechanisms that oppress women in Islamic countries. Commenting on this, Haideh Moghissi writes about women's resistance to Islamic fundamentalism:

The circumstance of women in Islamic cultures must be understood dialectically, as their determined resistance strains against forces of social, economic and political retardation.

(Moghissi, 1999:11)

Thus, although women may be involved in acts of resistance against fundamentalism, some women have very few alternatives but to continue in their validation of fighting against their opposition on the basis of religion. It would appear that they would face less incrimination from men, if they were seen to be complying with Islam (subversion). This is substantiated in the following statement on the rights of Islamic women:

*'Women are becoming more aware of their rights and we have fought for women's rights. Women are getting power and we tell them that these are your rights and if you don't fight for your rights, those rights will be taken away.'*  
(Shaheeda, Muslim Women's Organization)

The question is why do women in Britain use religion as an emancipatory tool? Haleh Afshar's (1994) account of the use of Islamism and Islamic feminism in Iran sheds some light on this. Firstly, Afshar contends that Muslims do not use the term fundamentalism. Instead Islamists refer to the revival of a pure religion. Secondly, Afshar argues that Islamism meets the needs of women, as exemplified by the case of Iran. However, Afshar recognizes that the rights of



women have not been automatically granted, instead they have had to be fought over and one tool in this struggle is the Koran as an emancipatory vehicle. Implicit in this is a rejection of certain forms of western feminism, which in her view has 'liberated women to the extent that they are prepared to become sex objects and market their sexuality as an advertising tool to benefit patriarchal capitalism' (Afshar, 1994: 16). However, in Iran, women have been involved in a struggle with a system that marginalises them politically, legally and economically. Through struggles over how to *interpret* the Koran, they have made many gains in the field of education and gender segregation. Women have become politicians and have acquired the support of leading politicians. However, it is the example of interpretative struggle over meaning that provides the link between Iran and Britain. Thus, even though being Muslim in Britain signifies cultural 'Otherness', it is crucial that women remain alert and critical of all forms of oppressive practice including that connected to religion, ethnicity and/or 'race'. One way of doing this is through struggles over and within Islam. As Moghissi states:

The best way to express solidarity with the Muslim diaspora is not to keep silent about oppressive features of one's own cultural tradition or the inhumane practices of fundamentalist regimes.

(Moghissi, 1999:4)

The ideas of oppressive cultural practices and religious fundamentalism are shared by writers such as Moghissi (1999), P.Patel (1997), Saghal and Yuval-Davis (1992). However, as shown above, the feminist use of fundamentalism as an analytical tool has been questioned (Sayyid, 1997). Through a discussion of the symbolic and practical use of the veil in Islamic cultures, Sayyid argues that

the mandatory removal of the veil could also be regarded as an oppressive act. The significance of the veil representing agency and resistance will be returned to later in the chapter. Sayyid's replacement of the word fundamentalism with Islamism is indicative of a more positive appraisal of Islam, in terms of setting itself against western imperialism. However, the continued usage of the term fundamentalism by Muslim feminist writers goes against this. They claim that women in Islamic countries express the level of oppression they experience as both corporeal and psychic.

The question is, why does a so-called 'liberation' movement, Islamism continue in its oppression of women? Perhaps the following statement from Tariq Ali's, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*, in which he cites a verse entitled 'Women', best exemplifies the restrictions imposed by religion:

The reality of women in Islam is a prefabricated destiny. Here the Koran is unambiguous. The chapter entitled 'Women' recognizes the importance of the female sex and, for that reason, deems it essential to impose a set of severe social and political restrictions that determine their private and public conduct. While some sections of the text are open to a more generous interpretation, the foundational verse [from the Koran] leaves no room for doubt:

"Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them, forsake them in beds apart, and beat them. Then, if they obey you, take no further action against them. Surely Allah is all-knowing and wise" (4.34)

(Ali, 2002:60)

If this interpretation is right, a serious in-built limitation is placed on statements such as Mumtaz's cited above. It will be remembered that her organization

teaches women to read the Koran in Arabic, to challenge religion and to use it to one's own advantage through interpretation and application. It appears that Muslim women tread a narrow path between "freedom from' (uncertainty and insecurity, which has characterized women's politics) and 'freedom to' (to be autonomous, to be self defined which has characterized feminist politics)' (Saghal and Yuval-Davis, 1992:1). For this reason the following section will examine the role of feminism or feminist vocabulary along with other issues such as subversion, feminism and agency. I will also examine the interpretations of freedom or liberation made by Muslim women and assess whether there is something called 'Islamic feminism'.

### **Is Islamic Feminism an Oxymoron?**

Feminist understandings of religious fundamentalism are usually framed in the language of patriarchal oppression. For South Asian women, as outlined in Chapter Six, patriarchal oppression can be familial, cultural, traditional and communal. What is required from women is the preservation of integrity, with the expectation that they will suppress their own needs in favour of those of the family, community, culture or religion. It is a task which requires more than compromise and those women who do not or will not compromise are labelled as those who wash their community's linen in public (P.Patel, 1997). The cross-cultural variability of patriarchal oppression is important in the analysis of South Asian women's position in society. The women's narratives that follow not only illustrate methods employed by women to challenge oppression within the community but also point to the internal differences and tensions in the approaches used by those using Islam and those who work in secular organizations. Women involved in both types of organizations use the language



of feminism through expressing the right to equality. Can we then regard those women who use the language of Islam as a vehicle for emancipation as feminists? On the question of rights the women working in religion-based organizations commented:

*'My idea was to open the centre to meet the potential of the young kids and to give educational support to help the women who are victims of illiterate people. Because of the lack of education, it creates a barrier between them and their husbands. The husband is always saying that the wife will never know what he's doing. Since the beginning, even in Pakistan I've always been against men when they are doing wrong things. Why are they doing it? If we are Muslim, so what? Allah didn't say it like that! When I came to England and I saw that the Gujarati women didn't know anything about their rights. We introduced them to their rights. We told them that these are your rights. In the beginning the men were against this, the Gujarati men, but I didn't care [laughter].'*  
(Latifa, Muslim Women's Organization))

*'The main aim of the centre is to educate the women, to make them aware. The principle of the organization is to educate women to challenge society outside and inside. The inside society means the home, children and husband. Education is very important. Nowadays the young women are much more aware than their mothers. We also offer them a range of services from legal to welfare and religion. If we had financial help we could offer other things for young girls and elderly women.'*  
(Mumtaz, Muslim Women's Organization)

*'In the early days, before this organization was set up, some men, religious men were threatening, asking me why I'd opened the shelter and why I was supporting the women. Asian men don't like to tell their wives everything. When women come here they don't know anything. Then we tell them of their rights. [...] We have applied for a grant for a Young Mothers Project, to build confidence because they don't want to go to college to do this.'*  
(Fatima, Muslim Women's Organization)

On domestic violence issues, Fatima stated that there were tensions between her organization and the feminist radical approach used by Women's Aid. In addition to this she had to comply with pressure from the community to help

women who are victims of domestic violence in the most appropriate way according to religion and culture:

*'The central office of Women's Aid is blaming us that we're supporting the men because I explain the women's rights and then I compromise. They say that once women come to the refuge they should cut off from the husband. I said this is not a good idea for our women because there should be space for negotiation. So we had the idea of setting up a separate refuge. I always explain to the women that perhaps before your husband didn't realize but give him a chance for six months or a year. If it's the same then come back and we'll do something for you and your children because nobody will want to marry your daughters or your sons. There are so many things to consider.'*  
(Fatima, Muslim Women's Organization)

Fatima had complied with men's wishes to reconcile couples and she also used the idea of status and marriage within the community to persuade women to return to their husbands. Thus although Muslim women were able to fight for their rights they were only allowed to do this within defined parameters. Continuing with the issue of domestic violence Shaheeda commented:

*'I didn't want to study law but needs and necessities motivated me to learn law. When I came to England I realized that the Asian women did not know how to communicate, they didn't know about their rights. They suffered domestic violence and child abuse. Now some of the women know their rights, their entitlements. Previously they would have to rely on their husbands to accompany them, now they're doing it for themselves. Now they are stronger because relying on one person such as the husband means obeying him [...] I fought for the right to study. No Asian man would say leave everything behind and go and study, you have to fight for your rights. One you have achieved it he will have to accept it.'*  
(Shaheeda, Muslim Women's Organization)

Shaheeda's comments are related to the acquisition of rights and the importance of education that use the language of feminism. I will be drawing on the work of feminist writers and will make references to debates on whether Islam, in the face of patriarchy, can transform women's position in society. On

the compatibility of Islam and feminism, Deniz Kandiyoti makes the following observation:

The debates concerning the compatibility of Islam and feminism are based on a fundamental fallacy. This fallacy resides in addressing Islam qua religion and interrogating its central texts in search for an answer to the question of women's rights.

(Kandiyoti, 1996: 10)

Kandiyoti argues that women who look to religion for a route to equality and emancipation are mistaken. The relationship between feminism and religion may appear to be misleading due to Muslim women in Islamic countries engaging in this process. It has led to a change in the west viewing the Islamic world, from Orientalist to a neo-Orientalist or more 'positive' understanding. The neo-Orientalist discourse refers to the role of Islamic feminists who pursue the goal of equality within the structures of Islamic society. Thus, if women are seen to be achieving goals of education and political rights, it is an indication of the progressive nature of Islam in women's lives. The neo-Orientalist or more 'positive' role of religion in women's lives is captured in the following statement:

[...] the 'Muslim woman' is presented as a wholly dignified, spiritually empowered being. Non-Westoxicated, she enjoys a balanced dose of public activity and moral restraint, an enviable security from the violence afflicting women in the developed West. If, in the Orientalist version, Islam is condemned for its unreformed and unreformable gender-oppressive character, in this neo-Orientalist version, it is applauded for its women-friendly adaptability, its liberatory potential.

(Moghissi, 1999:7)

However, the relationship between religion and women presented in this discourse is complex. On the one hand, Muslim women are able to assert a



positive religious identity, through which they are able to challenge their restricted roles within Islam. On the other hand, women are 'allowed' restricted roles in a religion. On this aspect, Haleh Afshar comments:

They [Muslim women] are the custodians of the religious beliefs, even though for centuries it has been men who have the interpreters of norms, values and practices according to that belief. They have been barred from *ijtihad*, religious discourse and interpretation, and some are even today not permitted to pray in mosques or to take part in public religious debates.

(Afshar, 1992:129)

One issue of particular difficulty is that religious doctrine and its ability to appropriate feminist demands of equality is able to mobilize women, for example in the Hindutva movement in India. It is equally able to cast women in the role of mothers and wives within the private sphere. Neesha who worked in a secular organization informed me of the role of religious leaders in domestic violence issues and their attitudes towards women:

*'Women are brought up to be good mothers and wives, and denied education. The mullahs of all different religions don't want things to change. Where in the book of God does it say that women have to be treated the way you have just been treated? It doesn't say it anywhere! A lot of the women who come to the refuge have been to their community leaders, have been to the mullahs asking for help. And they have in response been asked to become good wives by not provoking their husbands! They are also told that they should not be disintegrating the system and not leave their husbands because they will be unable to marry their daughters to suitable men.'*

(Neesha, Asian Women's Project).

It is interesting to note that here Neesha denies that the Koran has any statement about the subordinate role of women. This is a view that is in direct contrast to that of Tariq Ali. Whichever view is right religion is able to exert patriarchal control over women's behaviour and actions. If this is so, then

women who are informed by Islam could be unwittingly involved in a process, which is neither subversive nor emancipatory. They are effectively colluding in an ideology, which is pitted against their freedom and basic human rights to political involvement, health, education and employment. However Mumtaz argued that the training given by reading the Koran is a preparation for challenging inequality:

*'They ask us why we started the centre and we tell them that the main aim is to educate the ladies, to create awareness. To educate them [women] to challenge society outside and inside. The inside society means the home, children and husband [...] we have got [pause] did you hear about the Muslim Women's Helpline? We refer to them as well [...] The Muslim Women's Helpline will give advice based on the Koran. But we teach them the Koran and the Koran is just like a training.'*

(Mumtaz, Muslim Women's Organization)

The methods employed by this organization used interpretations of Islam that were favourable towards women. Through referring women to the Muslim Women's Helpline, advice was given on divorce, marriage and education based on Islamic principles. The role of this organization is similar to the findings of Julia Sudbury's study of black women's organizations. Sudbury comments on a Middle Eastern, Muslim women's organization that claimed to be apolitical:

Nevertheless, enabling women to claim their rights was central to the organisation's counselling. Users were informed about their rights under Islamic law to education, divorce, a spouse of their choice and to property and money. The organisation's work was seen as equipping women with the emotional strength and self-confidence to lead their lives more fully [...] However, it also had a subtext of challenging cultural norms which are oppressive to women. The presentation of the organization as simply 'helping women' was therefore a powerful tool in winning the support of Muslim communities and in particular religious leaders while actively challenging some of the very practices institutionalized by the more traditional mosques.

Mumtaz's organization has been in existence for fourteen years and because religion was central to its ethos, it had received a favourable response from men and the community. Since its inception, Mumtaz commented that the community had learned a great deal from the organization with attendance rapidly increasing. The prestige was further elevated through her observing the rules of *purdah* by wearing the *chador*. Nevertheless, tensions also existed amongst Muslim organizations exemplified through Mumtaz comparing the success of her organization with that of another which is run by Saheeda, the barrister. Mumtaz intimated that Islam is the focus of her organization and is the key to its success within the Muslim community.

If women in religious organizations fight for women's rights, can they be considered 'feminists' or 'Islamic feminists'? Indeed the role of women activists, for example in Iran, has led to them being referred to as Islamic feminists and for 'Western readers to become more attentive to the progressive Islamic discourses that are gradually developing in the region' (Tohidi, 1997:90). Shahrzad Mojab (2001) argues that these women activists do not refer to themselves as Islamic feminists, their philosophy ranges from being anti-Western, anti-feminist to recognizing feminism but avoiding identification with it (Mojab, 2001). Leila Ahmed (1992) argues that there are difficulties in reconciling feminism and Islam. In fact she also states there are difficulties in aligning feminism with other ideologies of the West or the East. Ahmed argues that 'colonial feminism' was used by the colonialists to position other societies as inferior through their oppression of women, although they would also be opposed to feminism in Europe.



However, Islamic feminism has also been described as reinforcing inequality between men and women and is not to be regarded as an alternative to other forms of feminism (Tohidi, 1997; Kandiyoti, 1996). In 'Theorizing the Politics of "Islamic Feminism"', Shahrzad Mojab (2001) critiques 'the theory and politics of feminism based on Islamic approaches to gender relations' (Mojab, 2001: 124). Although she uses terms such as 'secular' and 'religious feminist' scholars in her references to the work of Leila Ahmed, Aziz al-Hibri, Riffat Hassan and Fatima Mernissi, Mojab uses the example of Iran and the Islamization of gender relations to comment on the status of women. Women, although involved in the revolution, were subject to repression through coercive veiling and accorded them the status of mothers. Shahidian (1998) argues that Islamic feminism is an oxymoron and explains:

If by feminism is meant easing patriarchal pressures on women, making patriarchy less appalling, 'Islamic feminism' is certainly a feminist trend. But if feminism is a movement to abolish patriarchy, to protect human beings from being prisoners of fixed identities, to contribute towards a society in which individuals can fashion their lives free from economic, political, social and cultural constraints, then 'Islamic feminism' proves considerably inadequate. I define feminism in these latter terms, and for that reason, I consider 'Islamic feminism' an oxymoron. (Shahidian, 1998: 51)

The reinforcement of patriarchy is demonstrated by the existence of unequal laws relating to men and women. The central concern for Mojab is power and control over women. Thus, when Bobby Sayyid proposes the veil as potentially emancipatory, it is not for women who have been coerced – the case of Iran is an example. The inequality in an Islamic state is something that Muslim women would not choose, although some women can 'choose' to wear the *hijab* in Britain. The *hijab* as a symbol of identity is one thing but using it as a force of

resistance is limited. Reform through feminist interpretations of religion do not necessarily challenge the distribution of power, what is necessary is the separation of the state from religion, i.e. a dismantling of the Islamic state. Mojab (2001) concedes that western feminism does not involve rejection of reform or that equality has been achieved due to the patriarchal nature of the law. However, she is critical of reform in Islamic states and the limitations of Islamic feminism. Therefore it does not matter whether a religion such as Islam respects and treats women as equals, the main contention is that this notwithstanding, women cannot call on universal human rights or citizenship. Thus Mojab states:

Islamic theocracy and Islamic feminism in Iran have reached a dead-end [...] By 1988, only eleven of the twenty two members of the League of Arab States had ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the rest approved it with reservations. In all such reservations, Islam was the obstacle to the elimination of one or another form of discrimination.

(Mojab, 2001:142-3)

If the appeal is to human rights why would Muslim women in Britain want to restore customary law? In her discussion of South Asian customary law, Samia Bano (1999) argues against customary (Islamic) law under which the practices of polygamy, under age marriage and unilateral male divorce under Islamic law are in opposition to international human rights. This raises the question of why women would want to see erosion in their rights through customary law which would relegate them to positions as mothers and to be viewed solely through their role in the family. These are serious considerations particularly in connection with cultural identity and the multicultural politics of citizenship. It is worth reminding ourselves of 'freedom' (claim to human rights) by Hanana

Siddiqui in response to embracing a Muslim identity in a 'Letter to Christendom' by Rana Kabbani (1989). Siddiqui replies:

Rana Kabbani also argues that the *hijab* has become a symbol of resistance from the imperialist, racist, and Christian forces of the West, which demand assimilation, and overpower and destroy Eastern cultures. I accept that this perspective exists, even in Britain, where, after the Rushdie affair, some women are reasserting their Muslim identity by taking up the *hijab*, but I believe that such a perspective mitigates against the long-term interests of women. It poses dangers for those of us who have been working to liberate ourselves from those restrictions. These developments have to be seen in the context of wider pressures to control women [...] By arguing in such terms, she is, in effect denying the right of women to determine their own lives. [...] Winning freedoms means the right to choose who my enemies and friends are. In this the hope for the future lies.

(Siddiqui, 1991: 81-83)

Siddiqui's involvement in Southall Black Sisters and Women Against Fundamentalism indicates how women have openly contested religious and cultural values. Thus with the political activism and determination of South Asian women, some of those difficulties have been faced, opposed and overcome. Contrasting Siddiqui's position with that of some of the participants in this study illustrates that if the *hijab* represents resistance for some women, others find it oppressive. So far, it can be seen that the use of religion as an emancipatory tool is complex. In Europe women have appropriated codes of dress as acts of resistance. One illustration of which is the increased popularity amongst younger Muslim women 'choosing' to wear the *hijab*. Another aspect to the Muslim identity is the participation of young Muslim women in religious male-based organizations that remain hostile to the rights of women. If this is the case, can the wearing of the veil/*hijab* be interpreted as a positive action?



The next section therefore looks at the various ways in which the veil/*hijab* has been interpreted and whether those women wearing the *hijab* can be considered as having agency.

### **Symbolism of the Veil/*Hijab***

Although the subversive nature of religion is debatable it does highlight the ambivalence and contradiction in the 'choices' that people have to make and the conditions under which agency operates. Thus, for example, Islamist women claim to feel empowered and liberated, rather than oppressed by the use of the veil/*hijab*, defending its adoption as a symbol of Islamification. There is a debate around veiling involving veiled, unveiled and re-veiled women, and Muslim and non-Muslim women have had to confront this issue particularly in view of Islamic revivalism in the West (Najmabadi, 1993). There is also room for feminist discussion on the use of the veil allowing a more informed account of the needs of different women. Although the wearing of the veil can be interpreted, as a symbol of resistance, there is a danger that another binary is created with the 'ideal Islamic woman' constructed in opposition to western values and significations of emancipated womanhood (Pile, 1997; Yeganeh, 1993). Mumtaz, who equated knowledge not only with challenging oppression but also with confidence building, emphasized the notion of empowerment. To begin with, she informed me of her experiences of working in a department store that required a certain form of dress and then comments on the confidence of women to wear the *hijab*:

*'When I started working in Debenhams, the personnel ordered me to wear a black skirt and a white shirt but I refused on the grounds of equal opportunities. I was given an apology and I could pray five times a day. Then I continued to work in my salwaar kameez. I also wear this to functions and meetings. I am*

*more confident. That is why our women have to be more confident. [...] We are encouraging them that you can keep your identity and you can still mix with them. We have a lot of very educated people like doctors. Women are mixing and they are keeping their identity, they are wearing the hijab. They are conscious about their religion. Before it was a lack of confidence that women were starting to drink as well.'*

(Mumtaz, Muslim Women's Organization)

Mumtaz observed the strict rules of purdah and in public she wore the *chador*. The other women working in Muslim organizations however did not. Two of the women wore *salwaar kameez* without their heads covered and one dressed in western clothes. Mumtaz's ideas around dress therefore represent one version of modest dress. Modest dress or wearing one of several versions of the hijab not only contrasts with the 'western woman' image but also is justified in terms of avoiding objectification by men. Released from being regarded as sexual objects, the wearing of the *hijab* is considered as enabling women to participate in public spaces, with the role of the state (in Islamic societies), or religions (in societies such as Britain) set as a protector of women's virtues (Kabbani, 1989). The concept of the *hijab* has been introduced at this point because not only does it act as a visual symbol of difference, but it also has been regarded as a form of resistance. In this it condenses the ambiguity and symbolic mobility of Islam and Muslims in contemporary Britain. However, the representation of modesty within Islam is not contained within a singular form of the *hijab*. Indeed when compared to the idea of western immodest dress, conceptions of 'nakedness' within Islam vary from one strand of hair showing to provocative coloured clothes, from uncovered hands and face to an uncovered midriff (Afshar, 1992).

Needless to say that the concept of morality and modesty for Muslim women is central to maintaining the family honour (*izzat*). Loss of honour however not only occurs through immodest dress, it stretches to involvement with political ideas such as feminism. Therefore, if within the Muslim community, feminism and its association with gaining 'rights' for women is regarded as ideologically incompatible, then it follows that Muslim women, caught in the bind of loyalty to religion and the assertion of equal rights, have claimed a defiant Islamic identity in the face of patriarchal power and racism.

The importance of mosque leaders is something that cannot be overlooked. As a political force within Europe, Islam has come to be regarded as a major obstacle to the process of assimilation. As Chapter Three has indicated the west has constructed knowledge of the Orient within a binary, i.e. the west constructs its identity through the process of projection onto the Other. The ways in which this construction is reproduced in contemporary society is best illustrated through two events, the 'Rushdie affair' in Britain and the 'headscarf issue' in France (Solomos, 1993; Sayyid, 1997)). Both events highlight the international impact of Islam and the assertion of an Islamic identity and agency by women.

The 'Rushdie affair' and the 'headscarf issue' demonstrate the complexity surrounding religious identity and its presentation as homogeneous. Instead the heterogeneity of Muslim diasporas needs to be recognized. Although this in itself is difficult, heterogeneity may be through the links that Muslims retain to their countries of origin. Suffice it here to say that this research recognizes internal differences of Islam, i.e. loyalties amongst different Muslim communities



with reference to culture, nation state and language. Taking this into account, I have drawn on a common Muslim identity which entails a strategic designation of an ethnic identity (an 'imagined community') of an Islamic diaspora. This is similar to the strategic designation of a South Asian identity that the women in my research refer to.

Given the high level of publicity around the 'Rushdie Affair' and the 'headscarf issue', it raises questions about the involvement of women in public spaces. For some women, to claim a public space is a political motive and mobilization has shown to occur around a common Muslim identity. To claim a public space as Muslim women bearing the signs of that form of femininity through dress provides openings for them to exercise agency. Through their identification with a common religion, Muslim women have been shown to use the symbolism of the *hijab* and dress codes in public protests. An example of this is in Pnina Werbner's study of the Pakistani diaspora in Manchester (Werbner, 2002). Werbner's observations of the 'Women in Black March' illustrate that women can be mobilized by referring to a shared religious identity and thus present themselves as agentic. The women participating in the march were protesting against rape, torture and genocide in Bosnia and Kashmir. The following is her observation of the march:

Dressed in black, they seemed to fit media images of militant Islamic fundamentalists but this is misleading: they were moderates and democrats. At the same time, their feminist militancy and courage were unmistakable [...] The courage shown by this woman who led a procession in public with such determination and dedication was quite awesome. In between her shouts, a strictly veiled woman called out the traditional refrain of Sufi marches – '*Nare Takbir!*' '*Allah hu Akbar*', the women answered as though programmed in advance, underlining the hybridity of

the emancipatory discourses they deployed quite naturally which mixed the rhetoric of feminism and human rights with traditional Islamic chants.

(Werbner, 2002:263)

By dressing in black, the women provoked two contradictory images. The first image is connected to Islamic fundamentalism through its association with the oppressive black *chador*. The second is the image of militant Muslim women. The two images rest uncomfortably in the western view of patriarchal religions such as Islam, i.e. it does not guarantee women's rights. Werbner's study of non-secular organizations illustrates that Islam is regarded as a guarantor of women's rights and equality. Thus, not only did the Women in Black March make Islam 'the rallying cry for women's rights' (Werbner, 2002:264), it also claimed the public space usually associated with males. The march was significant in realizing the desire of Muslim women to be included in public community debates and to be considered as active citizens of Britain. Additionally, Werbner claims that coalitions had been made between women from secular and non-secular organizations. Werbner comments:

[The] challenge to male hegemony reflects the *ideological convergence* [emphasis in original text] of a nascent women's Asian and Muslim social movement in Britain and worldwide [...] The broad spectrum of women's organizations in Britain demanding a say in public affairs includes secular activists such as Southall's Black Sisters, protesting against Asian patriarchy and its more virulent effects [...], Kashmiri women nationalists, Islamist feminists who wear the *hijab* while demanding the right to study, work and decide whom to marry as well as the usual run of women's cultural or philanthropic organizations [...]

(Werbner, 2002: 260)

Although it is recognized that different groups of South Asian women have fought for their rights in a variety of ways, not all of the Muslim working in non-

secular organizations in my research expressed the importance of strict religious dress codes. The next section therefore looks at the changing understandings of religious modesty.

### **Changing Understandings of Religion and Modesty**

Not all Muslim women I interviewed expressed a positive opinion of the *hijab*. Some challenged their male relatives in connection with codes of dress whilst believing in the existence of a deity. Others questioned mandatory attendance at the Mosque and associated it with a form of socialism. The statements below show different understandings of a dress code. The first, Shaheeda has a very different understanding to that of Islamists:

*'I went to a party in a Muslim House and the young woman was wearing a veil at home because men were in the other room. I said that she should take it off because she is in her own home. That situation was ridiculous because the men use Islam as a shield. Islam does not say cover your face and everything. Islam says that your face and hands should be showing and to be dressed decently. Under no circumstances should they cover their faces.'*  
(Shaheeda, Muslim Women's Organization)

Shaheeda expressed that although she was not a practising Muslim, she was able to draw on the principles of Islam, thereby not designating Islam central to her identity or agency. Her attitude contrasted to the ideas of Mumtaz although both women were founders of Muslim women's organizations. Shaheeda expressed the negative impact of Islamic fundamentalism in countries such as Afghanistan and accused Islamist men of using women as a shield. Shaheeda's organization provided similar services to other organizations, for example English and Urdu classes. However the approach employed by her, as a barrister was integrative, particularly with reference to issues such as



communal violence amongst South Asian communities. Although Shaheeda's organization had no official premises, except her own home, she was able to offer her services as a barrister, across religious barriers in mosques, temples and women's centres. Her work also extends to adoption and controversially, visiting South Asian women prisoners. The second Muslim woman, Latifa, in her professional dealings with men early in her career, described what Muslim male councillors said to her, to change how she dressed:

*'We are living in this country [England] and he was asking me to cover my head! I told him that I wasn't going to cover my head and that I will cover it whenever I like. At that time I had short hair and he said, "don't wear those clothes [...] if you are coming to the function." I said, "forget about your function, I'm not going to come to your function."'*  
(Latifa, Muslim Women's Organization)

Latifa refused to comply with the demands of the councillor. This was similar to the attitude expressed by Samia a young woman who described herself as Muslim and was working in a secular organization open to women to all ethnic groups. Samia had suffered violence and sexual abuse from members of her family, and also had been denied education. She conveyed her story to me:

*'I've attempted suicide a couple of times, it's like I didn't have anybody but God. I know what it's like to be lonely, having nobody to turn to and I know how important it is that there are people in the world that can support each other. I didn't talk to him [brother] because he beat me up so much one day. He wanted me to wear a headscarf and I wouldn't wear it outside. "He said, "that's against our religion, I'm not doing it." I said, "I'm not doing it either."'*  
(Samia, Asian Women's Centre)

Samia stood up to the abuse from her family, in particular her brother. In doing so she has gained the respect from her family as a woman with agency, although at times her mother will utter 'sarre thereh kam putteh heh' (all your

ways are wrong). Her mother justified Samia's decision to opt for the freedom to travel, education and work by calling her *paghal* (mad).

Challenges have been put forward regarding codes of dress and Tariq Ali, in his critique of the impositions of late twentieth century Islamic fundamentalism notes forms of subversion in various sources of literature, particularly in connection with the wearing of the veil:

In Senegal they were never fond of the veil, in Bengal they covered their heads not their stomachs; in Java they displayed both. Everywhere they led secret lives, usually undiscovered by husbands or relatives.

(Ali, 2002: 65)

Tariq Ali however also uses examples from the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century to illustrate that before the imposition of a fundamentalist notion of Islam, various philosophers (labelled as heretics usually) have taken up the cause of women's rights. Women's rights within Islam has meant 'freedom from' segregation of the sexes, child marriage and the right to education.

Some of the women in my research viewed Islam in a different way. Due to her involvement in student politics, Zora told me:

*'I think there are a lot of parallels that can be drawn between Islam and socialism. The ideas aren't that far removed from Islamic ideas which were instilled in us as children. What I think attracted me to left wing politics in general is that they discussed issues which are close to my heart. The things that I was concerned with for example the majority of humanity in the developing world, the dynamics of capitalism and how that exacerbates poverty. They also seemed much more progressive in terms of issues related to black people, women, lesbians and gays.'*

(Zora, Antiracism Organization)

Zora was able to draw out the similarities between Islam and socialism whilst retaining the idea of a personalized not institutionalized religion. She had based her ideas about socialism on the idea of equality. If the Koran can be used to promote equality between the sexes, then equality amongst people is something that appeals to Zora. Indeed one of the five pillars of Islam promotes charity and the giving of alms to the less fortunate in society. Thus her interpretation of Islam is a sociopolitical one. Also, in her efforts to placate her parents she was also involved in subversion, particularly in connection with practising Islam. Thus when confronted with issues of fasting during Ramadan she was unable to say when it occurred or the last time she fasted. In terms of prayer and associated activities, Zora responded to her parents by arguing that religion should not be enforced through community surveillance. She describes her experiences of childhood and attendance at the mosque:

*'I remember when I was younger being forced to go to the bloody mosque after school five days a week to do Koran reading. I used to resent it so much and then by way of getting my own back on the unfairness of having to go every single night after school, me and my friends used to walk down the street and unscrew all the oil caps from the parked cars. We used to collect them from all the cars and we used to dump them at the end of the road down the drains. We used to do stupid things like that because we were annoyed that we had to go to mosque and I never used to pay any attention at all.'*  
(Zora, Antiracism Organization)

Zora believed that instead of forcing children to go to the mosque there should be an element of choice and restrictions on the number of days a child attended these classes. In her adult life she preferred to make the choice and regarded religion and all the associated activities as personal actions. Positioning herself on the political left, she made references to a 'practical feminism' as well as the



debates within Islam concerning the role of feminism, impacting on her perceptions and politicization.

Further comments were made by another Muslim woman in my research on the impact and influence of Islam on her life. Jahanara and another Muslim woman had a brief to work with 'minority ethnic women' in their training programme. It is valuable to hear what she had to say about her religion and identity:

*'I feel like I have the best of both worlds as I'm aware of my cultural background but I'm also adaptable, not the values but of being in London. I feel like a Londoner as well. I'm quite proud to be from London but I'm Bengali, I would say a Bengali from London. I've been brought up as an Asian Londoner and know the values of a particular community. I wouldn't say that I am deeply religious but I feel there are principles in all religions that are of value to society. I respect the values and principles of the Muslim religion.'*  
(Jahanara, Minority Ethnic Women's Training Programme)

Jahanara draws on cultural elements, i.e. difference but is also able to identify herself in a number of other ways. It was only when she was prompted that she talked about religion and confessed that her knowledge of Islam was limited and for her to make judgements would be inappropriate. However she displayed interest in studying religions in order for her to make comparisons about what she referred to as the 'good and bad points' or the 'common points'. Jahanara's experience shows how Muslim women are able to make choices with reference to studying, living away from home and marriage partner and acknowledge the role of religion that is neither Islamist nor fundamentalist.

## **Conclusion**

In summing up, focusing on religion has been valuable in many ways. We are reminded of the centrality of religion in some women's lives whether in secular or non-secular organizations. Although it represents a difficult issue in a study

of women's political activism, religion as an identity cannot be overlooked. This has been identified particularly on the Indian subcontinent through the increasing popularity of women involved in religious based activism. For this reason, I have contextualized the complex relationship between religion and women's rights by referring to developments in Iran. It is through this that we can arrive at an understanding as to why Islamic revivalism has attracted women. However, by pointing out the contradictions and oppressive practices it is also possible to question why women have become involved.

I also show that women can exercise agency in many forms and in different circumstances. However, whether it can be regarded as a subversive or emancipatory act is debatable, although it has provided some women with a vehicle for their 'liberation'. The difficulties associated with the use of the term fundamentalism and its replacement with the so-called 'neutral' term Islamism has also been questioned. With the continued usage of the term fundamentalism by feminists, it was pertinent to also consider the role of Islamic feminism. The questions around this are, whether it can be regarded as a form of resistance to the oppressive practices of Islam and if Islamic feminism can be thought of as an alternative to Western feminism, in its attempts to achieve equality within an Islamic state.

Through the narratives of the women interviewed I demonstrated that some women in non-secular organizations, viewed religion as a central identity which involved a strict adherence to the mandates of Islam. It was their belief that respect and equality could be gained through religious knowledge and the correct attire to avert the male gaze. Equally, for other women in both secular

and non-secular organizations, religious identity was a part of their many different identities. While they showed no outward symbols of religious affiliation, it provided for them guiding principles that can be found in many different religions.

Tensions between women of different religions were something to be expected, it was also evident amongst women of the same religion. Attitudes ranged from separatism to integrative within the organizations through the inclusion of women from different backgrounds. From the evidence, it is not possible to say that Muslim women in religious based organizations observed their religion strictly as there were many variations, i.e. some organizations worked with women from different religious backgrounds whereas other were exclusively for Muslim women. The narratives of Muslim women in secular organizations were included to illustrate the complexity of the relationship to religion. Attitudes towards religion varied from rejection to drawing parallels to other political movements such as socialism and feminism.

## NOTES

1. For a detailed understanding of Islamic history see Ahmed, A. (2002). For a contemporary study of Muslims in Britain see Lewis, P (1994).
2. See Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Gillespie, 1995; Saghal and Yuval-Davis, 1992
3. 'There are two main groups of Muslims in Britain, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, and the practice of Islam within these groups varies in accordance with the different Shari'a schools of thought' (Bano, 1999:173).
4. For a detailed examination of 'Islamism' see Sayyid (1997).



## **Chapter Eight      Conclusion**

This chapter draws together the findings from the thesis, lists its achievements and reviews the original aims of the study. On the basis of the findings, I make recommendations for further research concerning the study of South Asian women's constructions of political agency/mobilization and its links to identity and subjectivity. This ethnographic research took place in various London boroughs in the form of interviews with South Asian women, working in a variety of capacities.

Based on an understanding of political activism which moves away from the more visible forms such as party politics, South Asian women's involvement in political activism brings to the fore the question of agency, i.e. whether we can consider them as visible 'active agents' in the political arena. To facilitate a deeper and wider understanding of South Asian women's agency, historical contextualization of their experiences was necessary. In addition, feminist theory was employed to question how agency has been conceptualized. The question was how and why, despite their history of struggle, South Asian women have been depicted as victims of patriarchal control, unable to exert their influence on or to engage with power structures.

### **Key Aims of the Thesis**

Thus to restate, the key aims of the thesis have been:

- to explore the idea of South Asian women's political agency through a historical and contemporary analysis;

- to shift the debate away from the victim status assigned to South Asian women through an exploration of their political involvement in organizations;
- to understand how South Asian women's experiences and the interpretations of identity feed into their political agency;
- to unravel some of the complexities involved in the construction of political identity, subjectivity and agency.

### **Summary of Research Findings**

In my discussion in Chapters One and Two, I presented the intellectual terrain that provided the starting point for this study and identified the gradual rise of black women's organizations. The growth of this organizational infrastructure suggests that political mobilization has been in response *not only* to issues such as domestic violence and education *but also* to state racism, especially in connection with immigration legislation. At a policy level, South Asian women's organizations and women involved in work with South Asian or minority ethnic women, indicate the levels of involvement and the depth of problems they face and deal with. More positively, it also suggests that South Asian women have set up structures to challenge dominant discourses.

In Chapter One, I have argued that South Asian women can become empowered and resist oppression through political mobilization. However, empowerment and resistance presupposes domination or oppression. The consequences of this, I suggest, is that visible forms of resistance come to be seen as the only measure of agency. Instead, I propose a move away from political identities associated solely with resistance towards the idea of subjectivities and the multiplicity of experiences and power. Nevertheless the

diverse and contradictory nature of agency makes the task of reconceptualizing agency difficult. This was particularly relevant to agency based on *religion* for Jeffrey and Basu who comment:

Women's activism may also empower women from particular communities but at the cost of deepening religious and ethnic divisions amongst them.

(Jeffrey and Basu, 1998:10)

The difficulties were also associated with what the women used as their basis for collective and individual identities, as I illustrated in Chapter Five when considering the use of the political identity 'black' and the ethnic identity 'Asian'.

In the context of theoretical developments, in Chapter Two, I have argued that South Asian women are able to locate themselves in the area of politics not from the margins but from a 'third space' (Mirza, 1997; Bhabha, 1990). The 'third space' (Bhabha, 1990) is 'where new subjectivities, new politics and new identities are articulated' (Angela, 1990:73) and where *multiple positionings* (neither essentialized nor unitary) *can be occupied simultaneously*. This highlights how women are able to negotiate even under repressive systems and how they are able to undermine power structures. It also means moving away from the idea of power as simply oppressive towards a conception of power linked to knowledge. It requires an understanding of the power which circulates in and through discourses and which intersects with women's material lives. It opens up the gaps that in turn provide spaces for the expression of agency.

Recent studies on black women's organizations suggest that agency needs to be re-theorized away from a masculinist discourse and within the confines of the



Marxist dichotomy of structure/agency towards a wider understanding (Sudbury, 1998). Indeed, South Asian women's involvement in the political process has been recognized as they have openly contested religious and cultural values, although feminists have often been slow to recognize their agency (Davis and Cooke, 2002). South Asian women have maintained an active struggle against the oppression of women by their own communities who have remained silent over issues of gender even while they have been willing to fight against racial oppression. The involvement of South Asian women in struggles against racial and gender oppression poses a challenge to the image of docility and passivity prevalent in historical discourses. It also indicates that day-to-day living represents a site of political struggle. However despite the women's involvement in the fight against patriarchy, rights and equality, most interviewees did not subscribe to the feminist model as we know and define it. Despite this in Chapter Two I showed that although there were few identifications with feminism, Asian women are directed by feminist thinking in terms of rights and equality.

In Chapter Three I outlined how South Asian women have become racialized, demonstrating the networks of historical and contemporary discourses in the construction of the post-colonial female subject (Rattansi, 1994). Through excavating the mounting layers of discourse, it has been possible to show that South Asian women are not victims without agency but highly significant actors within the colonial and postcolonial periods. From the historical contextualization of women's experiences as racialized and gendered subjects it has been possible to demonstrate how they have had the capacity to mobilize in the face

of oppression. This is evident in their involvement in the feminist and nationalist movements (Thapar, 1993; Kumar, 1989; Trivedi, 1984).

Despite the emergence of South Asian women as highly significant actors in political activism, colonial discourses such as Orientalism have left an impression on contemporary writers with reference to their identities within the diaspora (Brah, 1996; Parmar, 1990). Specifically it was the Othering process referred to in Chapters Two and Three, in which I discuss the relevance of theoretical perspectives which state that post-colonial subjects refuse to be labelled as 'Other', and yet the term continues to be used to describe positioning. Avtar Brah has captured the essence of this process and brought together ideas related to symbolic positioning as well as belonging.

Brah argues for historical contextualization and for this study the political participation of South Asian women can only be understood by uncovering their long history of struggle. From this I was able to argue that the idea of political agency does not only rest on the historical contextualization of experience but also on the factors involved in gaining that particular experience. Therefore location and positioning along the axes of class, race, and religion with an understanding of the self is required. Understanding the self includes the notion of multiple, contradictory and essentialized identities and can be regarded as a meeting of the past and the present with location, culture and the self (Mohanty, 1992).

Reclaiming ethnic identities such as 'Asian' as some projects in the research do is problematic, although the implication is that an ethnic identity is important in



political mobilization. Chapter Five shows the limitation of an ethnic identity in that it can be regarded as culturally exclusive. Thus, it is important to retain notions of structural positioning and inequalities. Whilst avoiding the presentation of the women in the study as a homogeneous group, I have shown that although essentialized notions of identity can be used to work with Asian women - in the setting up of specific projects - identity conceptualized as a continuum can incorporate both essentialized and multiple forms of identity. It allows us to explore the subjectivity of South Asian women that includes the positioning of oneself within a discourse. This can be interpreted as a means of drawing on a collective experience to bring about social change whilst retaining non-static identities. This study has shown how a particular fragment of South Asian women understand themselves and has examined identity construction. Although it has been shown that women talk on the basis of collective identities with an appeal to essentialized identities such as Asian, they also spoke in terms of their individual identities, for example 'British Asian' or 'Indian'. This indicates the shifting nature of identities, subversion, and refusal of stereotyping. Literature is now saturated with the idea that identities are not static, plural and contradictory (Mama, 1995; Parmar, 1990). It is precisely the fluidity of identity that is complex, as it goes beyond the idea of fixed and essentialized political identities. The central importance of my study is that it has provided evidence and empirical grounding for this in Chapters Five, Six and Seven where I examined the impact of 'race', sexism and religion on South Asian women's agency. South Asian women have been shown to draw on history and to negotiate between essentialized and collective identities, and subjective experiences as postcolonial subjects.



The study has shown that agency based on religious identities raises serious concerns about the ideas of social change and equality. The likelihood of women claiming equality diminishes if they are seen to simultaneously resist and comply with patriarchal structures and hierarchies of power. As I have argued in Chapter Seven, religious ideologies play an important part in shaping the identities of women and thus their agency. However the subversive nature of religious identities can be called into question. I have demonstrated that there are contradictory understandings of women's religious agency and this is evident in the narratives of the interviewees. Contradictions occur when women understand the oppressive nature of religion and patriarchy but use it as a tool for gaining equality. Claims have been made by various writers that religion, specifically Islam, is able to shift the positioning of a socially oppressed group. This is a neo-Orientalist understanding in which religion features as egalitarian. I have shown by using examples from Iran, that although women echo the claims of feminists with the use of a feminist vocabulary, Islam as a tool for women's emancipation is limited. Using Islam requires bargains to be made with patriarchy which is revealed in the narratives presented here where it was shown that some Muslim women's organizations required conformity to the views of religious or community leaders. It is in this context that the narratives also revealed tensions between them and secular organizations. It is the conservative approach of religious organizations through the adoption of an Islamic identity to women's rights that is under question, for example reconciliation of women with their violent husbands. Yet the extent to which claiming women's rights through the adoption of a religious identity involves collusion with a patriarchal ideology remains unclear.

Religion as an emancipatory tool and its subversive role is complex and debatable. As shown in the narratives, it attaches itself to the idea of honour and shame, morality, the policing of sexuality, arranged and forced marriage, and dress codes (Afshar, 1992). In contradiction, these are the issues that have been taken up by the women working in secular organizations. The common ground appears to be challenges to gendered racialization. Chapter Six highlighted sexist cultural practices within South Asian families and communities. The narratives of women involved in secular organizations question Asian culture for its negative attitude towards women. They indicate how women are socialized into subservient roles and how raising awareness or 'consciousness raising', in feminist terms, is central to challenging the dominant discourses of the 'good' and 'bad' woman or the stereotypical South Asian woman.

I have demonstrated that South Asian women are able to challenge discourses and that they also were able to negotiate freedom within patriarchal structures rather than feel alienated or disempowered. Although levels of disempowerment were evident amongst some of the clients in women's organizations, the workers recognized this and employed empowerment strategies. The biggest taboo appeared to be lesbianism with lesbian sexuality remaining invisible. This is followed closely by relationships and romance as is evident in the narratives. Thus I have argued that sexuality and choice in marriage can be regarded as sites of agency. However, agency related to marriage and sexuality represents a threat to 'Asian culture'. Evidence lies in the hostile reception to the film 'Fire' which depicts lesbianism as an alternative form of sexuality (Kapur, 2000). It is in direct opposition to the status of respectability acquired through marriage.



Thus, unmarried women are the most likely to be policed with reference to sexuality and dress codes.

In Chapters Five and Six I have examined empirical evidence that shows that South Asian women have challenged the stereotyping in racialized and gendered discourses. Through their political activism in various organizations they have placed relevant issues onto the political agenda. South Asian women have asserted their 'right' to education, and freedom from the community's surveillance of 'honour' and 'shame'. South Asian women's ability to organize under oppressive conditions also indicates a rejection of multiculturalist understandings of issues such as violence, forced marriages *and* multiculturalist citizenship. This is indicated in the narratives of the women in secular organizations who have first hand experience of the negative effects of 'honour' and 'shame'. With reference to the multiculturalist understanding of oppressive practices, the narratives also indicate that South Asian women reject understandings from outside communities which place them in subordinate positions to men. Although this is apparent in secular organizations, the position and approach of religious organizations is more complex.

### **Achievements of the Thesis**

Political agency is central to the thesis and as the findings have indicated feminism is used as a tool of analysis to explain expressions of female political agency. As an analytical tool, feminism has highlighted the inadequacies of much contemporary social theory to understand the political activism of South Asian women. By problematizing political agency, the thesis has contributed to debates about whether there is a dominant masculinist understanding of the



public space and politics. I have argued that we should move towards a conceptualization that takes in the sheer variety of contexts - historical and contemporary - of South Asian women's experiences. Uncovering the underlying complexities involved in this process has been achieved through an appreciation of the long histories of South Asian women as active political agents.

One of the main aims of the thesis was to move away from the myth of passivity and stereotypical imaginings of South Asian women. In this, the thesis has shown through a process of historicization, that South Asian women have a history of struggle. Therefore, South Asian women's location in Britain can be understood more fully through recognizing them as political agents (colonial and postcolonial) on the Indian subcontinent. Overall the thesis provides an interpretive framework for political mobilization against forms of oppression by taking forward both the concepts of 'inferiorization' and 'othering' (Brah, 1996) and also the politics of location (Mohanty, 1992) in an integrated project, thereby linking the past with the present. Throughout the thesis, I have put forward ways of understanding forms of oppression in different locations and what the responses of women have been. To exemplify this, I have used the Indian subcontinent, Britain and Iran as locations for understanding the 'othering' process, along with responses in the form of the veiling of women and also the role of religion, for example, within Islamism and the Hindutva movement.

With reference to the present, South Asian women's organizations are especially significant as spaces for the expression of their agency. Through the narratives of the women interviewed, it is evident that in Britain there are issues that are of specific concern to South Asian women such as forced marriage and

the pressure to reconcile with violent partners. In terms of understanding such issues, the thesis provides an assessment of the significance and inadequacies of multiculturalism. Multiculturalist understandings have been shown to contribute to rather than explain South Asian women's oppression with reference to racialized sexism and issues such as forced marriage and sexuality. Thus the thesis has contributed to the existing debates on whether multiculturalism is 'bad for women' (Okin, 1999) by showing its consequences for South Asian women. In doing so, it challenges understandings of culture and asks why women reject oppressive cultural practices. I argue that an appeal to democratic procedures and using the forum of human rights would be more beneficial for women.

Cultural interpretations of religion have been shown to be oppressive towards women, perhaps the most important consequence of my research is to show how religion can *also* be used as an emancipatory force. Religion did not feature as part of the research initially, however, it has proved to be a strong point of identification in the construction of political identities. I have demonstrated the complexity of political agency by examining Hindutva and the role of Islam in Muslim women's political organization. My research therefore offers an explanation of the intellectual utility of religion as a concept or terrain for analyzing the social. This is particularly important with reference to contemporary issues such as the othering of the Muslim in Britain and the Indian subcontinent; the use of religious symbols such as the *hijab* as a form of political resistance to racism in the west; and, the use of religion as an emancipatory tool for women to achieve equality and rights in Britain and Islamic states.



In addition to religion as an important category for identification, I have confirmed that there are multiple sites of political agency and that the expression of agency ranges from small acts of empowerment (individual agency) to those which instigate social change (transformative agency). Further, I have deployed the idea of the 'continuum' to engage with the ways in which South Asian women negotiate, essentialize and use strategically or reject ethnic and political identities such as 'black' or 'Asian'. The 'continuum' also takes into account that contingent and multiple identities are linked to subjectivity and that political agency can be conceptualized as multi-layered.

### **Areas for Further Research**

The following are areas that require further study with research contributing to our knowledge of human agency. The focus of this study has been women but there needs to be research conducted on men of different age groups to show how and if they are politically active. This would resonate particularly with the increasing popularity of religious identities and involvement in antiracist work in Britain. It would also provide a wider analysis of the intersection of gender, race, class and sexuality.

One area of research that has omitted minority ethnic groups is sexuality. It has been recognized that sexuality within the Asian community is a taboo subject and there are very few studies conducted on sexuality which have included minority ethnic groups. I propose therefore research on South Asian men and women that would provide missing knowledge on a group of people. The analysis of such a study would provide rich data on the social and psychological processes involved in the construction of sexuality.



From a theoretical perspective, the complexity of women's agency needs to be recognized. This study makes it apparent that there are women who are mobilized on the basis of a variety of identities. Because this is a small scale, albeit in-depth qualitative study, there is scope for further research to uncover the extent of involvement through a survey method including qualitative research. I therefore recommend an extensive research programme on women's organizations and women who work with South Asian women specifically, that would extend the theoretical understanding begun in this thesis, especially of the ways in which political activism occurs. It is, moreover, important for policy makers that an understanding of political activism is extended to include women who work at grass roots level within the community.

**Appendix 1: Details of the Women Interviewed**

Name	Title	Organisation	Religion	Age	Ed.
1. Rani	Welfare Rights Officer	Asian Women's Resource Centre	Sikh	31	G
2. Zainab	Project Co-ordinator	Asian Women's Project	Muslim	36	G
3. Sonya	Detached Youth Worker	Youth Project	Hindu	35	HN D
4. Vijay	Refuge Case Worker	Asian Women's Project	Hindu	37	G
5. Kanwal	Refuge Case Worker & Debt Counsellor	Asian Women's Project	Sikh	29	PG
6. Parminder	Refuge Case Worker	Asian Women's Project	Sikh	25	G
7. Gargi	Refuge Case Worker	Asian Women's Project	Hindu	45	G
8. Neesha	Refuge/Resources Worker	Asian Women's Project	Muslim	42	G
9. Parvati	Refuge Case Worker	Asian Women's Project	Hindu	37	NG
10. Samia	Reception and Information Officer	Asian Women's Resource Centre	Muslim	21	NG
11. Zora	Campaigns Officer	Antiracism Organization	Muslim	25	PG
12. Anu	Project Manager	Asian Women's Cultural Society	Hindu		G
13. Rekha	Project Manager/ Counsellor	Asian Woman's Advisory Project	Hindu	38	NG
14. Rita	Deputy Director	Antiracism Organization	Sikh	58	G
15. Kay	Project Arts Officer	Arts Centre	Hindu		G
16. Sofia	Refuge Case Worker	Asian Women's Project	Sikh	24	NG
17. Jahanara	Asian Women's Employment and Training Officer	Employment and Training Project	Muslim,	29	G
18. Mumtaz	Founding Member	Muslim Women's Organization	Muslim		NG
19. Latifa	Founding Member	Muslim Women's Organization	Muslim		G
* 20. Premjit and Valerie	Solicitor and Project Worker	Asian Women's Project	Sikh		G
** 21. Shaheeda and Helen	Founding Member/ Barrister Barrister	Muslim Women's Organization	Muslim		G
22. Fatima	Co-ordinator	Muslim Women's Organization	Muslim	57	G
23. Pardeep	Young Asian Women's Development Worker	Asian Women's Project	Sikh	33	NG
24. Ravi	Community Cultural Support Worker	Child and Family Centre,	Hindu		G

\*I have counted this as one interview.

\*\* Helen was Shaheeda's employer, a human rights barrister.

## **Appendix 2: Interview Questions**

### **AREAS: Work, Family and Personal**

#### **Work**

Can you tell me about the sort of things you did at work today?  
Can you describe a typical day/best day/typical week at work?  
When did you start working here?  
How prepared were you for this type of work?  
What has drawn you to this type of work?  
Which aspects of your job give you the greatest amount of satisfaction?  
Describe how you feel about being on call.  
Are there any drawbacks to your work?  
How important is your work to you?  
Will you continue to work here?  
What is your relationship with the other workers?  
Did you specifically want to do this type of work? Why?  
Have you worked in similar organizations?  
What are the concerns for you working here?  
How do you deal with newly arrived clients and what sort of things do you do with them later?  
Do you feel supported in this organization?  
Is there an Asian community in the area?  
Do the community know about this organization?  
Do you have any ideas about what the community thinks of the organization?  
Do you take part in political work? If so what are your concerns and what do you get involved in?

#### **Personal/Family**

How would you describe yourself?  
Do you see yourself as an independent person?  
Age, religion, family, siblings, married, cohabiting, living alone, divorced?  
Do you talk to anyone about your work?  
Were you born in this country? If not how old were you when you came here?  
Describe growing up – school, behaviour, boys.  
Describe your relationship with your family.  
What are your views on marriage, family and being Asian?  
Where do you live and are you part of a community?  
Do you see your work as political in any way?



**Appendix 3: Ethnic Composition of the Population of Great Britain**

**Source:** Owen, D. (1992-1995) *1991 Census Statistical Papers 1-9*, Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations, University Warwick/CRE.

	Number	% of Total Population	% Born in UK
Total Population	54,888,800	100	93
White	51,873,750	94.5	96
Ethnic Minorities	3,015,050	5.5	48
Black Caribbean	499,964	0.9	53
Black African	212,300	0.4	36
Black Other	78,401	0.3	
Indian	840,255	1.5	42
Pakistani	475,555	0.9	50
Bangladeshi	162,035	0.3	37
Chinese	156,938	0.3	28
Other Asian		0.3	
Other Other	280,200	0.5	40

**Population**

At the 1991 Census, just over 3 million (5.5%) of the 55 million people living in Britain did not classify themselves as white. Half of them are South Asian (Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi), and 30% are black.

**Residential Distribution**

97% of Britain's minority ethnic population live in England, mostly in large urban centres.

In 1991, minority ethnic groups made up 20% of the population of London. In Greater London 1,346,800 minority ethnic people reside. They make up 44.8% of the total minority ethnic population of Great Britain.

**Religion**

The 1991 Census did not include a question about religion. Precise information is not available and the figures below are extrapolations from census data on ethnic background. Information was provided by organizations within the religious communities. The following are estimates:

Religion	Numbers
Baha'i	6,000
Buddhist	130,000
Christian	40 million
Hindu	400 – 555,000
Jain	25 – 30,000
Jewish	3 million
Muslim	1 – 1.5 million
Sikhs	350 – 500,000
Zoroastrians	5 – 10,000

**Source:** Commission for Racial Equality Factsheets, London, 1997.

#### Appendix 4: Ethnic Composition of the Population of London

**Source:** Association of Local Government (1996) *London Government Directory 1996-97: A Guide to Local Government in London*, London: Association of London Government.

\* Interviews were held in these boroughs

Ethnic Group %	White	Black	Indian subcontinent	Chinese	Others	Born in Ireland	Under 16
Barking and Dagenham	92	2.4	3.3	0.4	1.2	2.0	22.5
Barnet	81.6	3.56	8.53	1.32	4.97	3.90	20.12
Bexley	93.3	1.6	2.9	0.7	1.5	1.48	20.73
*Brent	55.2	16.51	20.50	1.05	6.72	9.02	20.41
Bromley	95.32	1.56	1.35	0.39	1.35	1.83	17.60
Camden	82.15	5.51	5.66	1.54	5.12	6.46	16.15
Croydon	78.8	9.7	6.9	0.6	4.0	2.7	21.1
Ealing	67.71	7.07	19.03	0.62	5.28	5.94	19.97
Enfield	82.5	10.2	5.6	0.6	3.0	3.0	21.0
Greenwich	87.25	5.35	4.20	0.80	2.36	2.77	22.14
*Hackney	66.43	22.00	6.27	1.06	4.24	3.96	23.67
Hammersmith and Fulham	82.49	10.07	2.82	0.74	3.73	6.81	15.97
Haringey	70.98	17.09	5.83	1.12	4.96	5.21	19.58
Harrow	68.9	3.7	17.6	0.9	4.1	4.9	19.0
Havering	96.1	1.2	1.6	0.5	0.6	1.6	19.3
Hillingdon	87.71	1.64	7.93	0.51	2.19	3.09	19.75
*Hounslow	75.57	2.74	17.12	0.63	3.92	3.81	20.33
*Islington	81.1	10.6	3.5	1.3	3.5	7.1	19.1
Kingston	91.4	1.0	3.1	0.8	3.8	2.7	18.24
*Lambeth	70	21.8	3.6	1.3	3.6	4.8	19.5
Lewisham	78.0	16.2	1.8	1.0	2.9	3.4	19.9
Merton	83.7	5.7	5.3	0.72	4.5	3.4	18.5
*Newham	50	19	25	1	4	2	25.1
Redbridge	78.6	4.2	13.9	0.7	2.6	3.0	19.8
Richmond	94.5	0.8	2.1	0.5	2.1	2.9	17.1
Southwark	71.8	20.9	3.0	1.5	2.8	4.5	21.8
Sutton	94.1	1.4	2.1	0.5	1.9	2.3	19.3
*Tower Hamlets	60.55	8.04	27.65	1.16	2.59	2.50	24.20
Waltham Forest	74.4	11.3	10.5	0.6	3.2	2.9	20.3
Wandsworth	80.0	10.6	5.1	0.8	3.5	4.2	16.6
Westminster	78.6	7.7	4.9	1.6	7.2	5.3	13.6
Corporation of London	92.7	0.9	2.4	1.4	2.7	3.7	6.1

## Appendix 5: Political Composition of London Boroughs

Source: Association of Local Government (1996) London Government Directory 1996-97: A Guide to Local Government in London, London: Association of London Government.

### Barking and Dagenham

Labour	47
Residents	3
Liberal Democrat	1

### Barnet

Conservative	29
Labour	25
Liberal Democrat	6

### Bexley

Conservative	24
Labour	24
Liberal Democrat	14

### Brent

Conservative	33
Labour	28
Liberal Democrat	5

### Bromley

Conservative	32
Labour	21
Liberal Democrat	7

### Camden

Labour	48
Conservative	7
Liberal Democrat	14

### Croydon

Labour	40
Conservative	30

### Ealing

Labour	49
Conservative	19
Liberal Democrat	3

### Enfield

Labour	41
Conservative	24



## Greenwich

Labour	46
Conservative	8
SDP	3
Liberal Democrat	3
Independent	2

## Hackney

Labour	40
Liberal Democrat	10
Conservative	8
Independent	2

## Hammersmith and Fulham

Labour	33
Conservative	14
Liberal Democrat	2

## Haringey

Labour	57
Conservative	2

## Harrow

Liberal Democrat	29
Conservative	16
Labour	14
Independent Residents	3
Independent	1

## Havering

Labour	28
Residents	17
Conservative	12
Socialist	4
Liberal Democrat	2

## Hillingdon

Labour	41
Conservative	25
Militant Labour	2
Socialist Labour	1

## Hounslow

Labour	50
Conservative	6
Liberal Democrat	4

## Islington

Labour	37
Liberal Democrat	13
Conservative	1

Independent	1
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### Kensington and Chelsea

Conservative	39
Labour	15

### Kingston Upon Thames

Liberal Democrat	27
Conservative	17
Labour	6

### Lambeth

Labour	24
Liberal Democrat	25
Conservative	14
Independent	1

### Lewisham

Labour	62
Liberal Democrat	2
Conservative	1
Militant Labour	1
Socialist Labour	1

### Merton

Labour	40
Conservative	10
Liberal Democrat	3
Independent Resident	3
Longthornton Resident	1

### Newham

Labour	60
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### Redbridge

Labour	29
Conservative	23
Liberal Democrat	9

### Richmond Upon Thames

Liberal Democrat	44
Conservative	6
Labour	2

### Southwark

Labour	34
Liberal Democrat	25
Conservative	3
Independent Liberal	1
Socialist Labour	1

**Sutton**

Liberal Democrat	47
Labour	5
Conservative	4

**Tower Hamlets**

Labour	43
Liberal Democrat	7

**Waltham Forest**

Labour	26
Conservative	16
Liberal Democrat	14
Independent	1

**Wandsworth**

Conservative	48
Labour	13

**Westminster**

Conservative	45
Labour	15

**Corporation of London**

Independent	ALL
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